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## From roundabout ro roundabout: Tahrir Square (1869- 2021)

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**ABSTRACT**  
**FROM ROUNDABOUT TO ROUNDABOUT**  
**TAHRIR SQUARE (1869-2021)**

by  
**Mariam Abdelazim**

Tahrir Square not only represents a symbol of liberation but also reflects the modern history of Egypt. Its several physical changes signify the rise and fall of the monarchy, colonialism, modernism, nationalism, capitalism, echoing a constantly changing definition of the Egyptian public space. And while the surrounding façades physically define the square, either the authorities or the public control its activities.

Khedive Ismail founded the square around 1869 as a roundabout on his “Paris along the Nile” modern city. Between 1882 and 1947, the site became the barracks’ location for the British troops who colonized Egypt. In 1952, an Egyptian military coup overthrew the monarchy and later ended the British occupation. Since then, Tahrir Square has served as a symbol of a nationalized and then globalized Egypt. In 2011, thousands of Egyptians occupied Tahrir and ousted Mubarak -- the longest-ruling president in Egypt’s history. The square became a miniature Egyptian society, where people from different social, political, and religious groups congregated and performed a variety of political, cultural, social, and religious activities. However, starting in 2011, Egypt experienced political instability, and Tahrir represented a threat to the ruling regime. Thus, the square turned into a surveilled space where access and activities were controlled. In 2019, the

government commissioned a landscape architect who converted Tahrir into “an open-air museum” or a roundabout with an obelisk and four sphinxes -- showcasing an Ancient Egyptian identity.

The purpose of this dissertation is to track the history, design, and use of Tahrir Square from 1869 to 2021. Drawing from previous scholarship, in English, Arabic, and French, analyzing historical and contemporary maps and pictures, and relying on site observations, the research demonstrates how the transformations in Tahrir Square and its surrounding buildings echo the political, social, and cultural landscapes of Cairo during several pivotal moments in its history and in Egyptian history.

**FROM ROUNDABOUT TO ROUNDABOUT  
TAHRIR SQUARE (1869-2021)**

**by  
Mariam Abdelazim**

**A Dissertation  
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Doctor of Philosophy in Urban Systems**

**Hillier College of Architecture and Design**

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**APPROVAL PAGE**  
**FROM ROUNDABOUT TO ROUNDABOUT**  
**TAHRIR SQUARE (1869- 2021)**

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*To my parents*

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 The Roundabout .....	2
1.2 Conceptual Framework.....	3
1.3 Dissertation Organization and Significance .....	5
2 RESEARCH METHODS .....	7
3 PUBLIC SQUARES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA.....	18
4 HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN CAIRO (1805 – 2021) .....	28
4.1 Modern Cairo (1805 - 1952) .....	28
4.1.1 The Origins of the Modern City .....	28
4.1.2 Erecting the Modern Capital .....	30
4.1.3 Downtown Under the British Occupation .....	35
4.2 Nationalist Cairo (1952 – 2015) .....	38
4.2.1 Downtown Under Nasser’s Regime .....	39
4.2.2 Downtown Cairo Sadat’s <i>Infitah</i> Policy .....	41
4.2.3 Reviving Cairo of the Belle Epoque .....	41
4.3 The New Administrative Capital .....	44
5 TAHRIR SQUARE (1874 – 2021) .....	46
5.1 Founded (1874): a <i>rond point</i> in Modern Cairo .....	48
5.2 Colonized (1882 – 1952): a military barrack during the British occupation .....	52

## TABLE OF CONTENTS (Continued)

Chapter	Page
5.3 Nationalized (1952 – 1970): a national symbol of liberation .....	69
5.4 Globalized (1970 – 2011): a site for infitah manifestation .....	85
5.5 Occupied (2011 – 2013): a platform for political expression .....	90
5.6 Surveilled (2013 – 2019): a transitional public space .....	97
5.7 Exhibited (2019 – 2021) .....	100
6 IMPLICATIONS.....	110
6.1 Visualizing Tahrir Square .....	113
6.2 Future Research on Tahrir .....	115
APPENDIX PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH ARCHITECTS AND URBAN DESIGNERS .....	118
REFERENCES.....	120

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1.1 Research Questions and Sources of Data .....	8



## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
3.1 Al-Safat Square .....	21
3.2 Pear Square Before and After the 2011 Uprising.....	22
3.3 Taksim Square.....	23
4.1 A map of Azbakiyya and Ismailia quarters.....	33
4.2 Ali Mubarak's Plan of Cairo, 1869.....	35
5.1 Map of Modern Cairo in 1874 .....	51
5.2 British military barracks and Egyptian Museum in early 1900s.....	56
5.3 1908 Map of Ismailia Square.....	58
5.4 British military barracks and Egyptian Museum in 1904.....	58
5.5 A map of Ismailia Square in 1920.....	63
5.6 An aerial view of Ismailia Square in 1938.....	63
5.7 A view looking southwest at Ismailia Square in the 1940s.....	64
5.8 King Farouk raising the Egyptian flag on the British Barracks, 1947.....	65
5.9 Moussa Qattawi's proposal for Ismailia Square in 1912.....	66
5.10 Muhammad Dul-Fakkar's proposal for Ismailia Square in 1947.....	68
5.11 A view looking south of Tahrir Square's roundabout in the 1960s.....	68
5.12 October 1952 military parade in Tahrir Square.....	71
5.13 January 1953 parade photographs.....	72
5.14 Aerial view of the January 1953 parade.....	73
5.15 Cairo Municipality scheme for Tahrir Square in 1953.....	75

## LIST OF FIGURES (Continued)

Figure	Page
5.16 Karim’s 1953 proposal for Tahrir Square.....	75
5.17 The monument of the unknown soldier by Mahmoud.....	75
5.18 Time Magazine advertisement of the Nile Hilton Hotel in 1959.....	79
5.19 Two pictures showing the Arab League, the Hilton Hotel, and the Arab Socialist Union Buildings in the 1960s.....	81
5.20 Tahrir Square in 1956 looking from Mogama.....	83
5.21 Tahrir Square fountain and park in the 1960s.....	83
5.22 An aerial view of Tahrir Square Park and roundabout in the 1960s .....	84
5.23 Tahrir Square bus station in the 1960s.....	84
5.24 Tahrir Square as a construction site for the metro line in 1982.....	88
5.25 Tahrir Square metal fencing.....	89
5.26 Egyptian celebrating the toppling of Morsi in July 2013.....	96
5.27 The main street leading to Tahrir Square blocked by tanks and metal fencing.....	99
5.28 Tahrir Square on the 5th anniversary of the January 2011 Revolution.....	99
5.29 Tahrir Square 2019-2020 redesign.....	103
5.30 Tahrir Square roundabout redesign from 2016 to 2019.....	104
5.31 Tahrir Square during the 1960s vs. 2009.....	107
5.32 Tahrir Square in 2009 vs 2020.....	107
5.33 Screenshot of Parade Broadcast on Ten TV Station.....	109
5.34 Tahrir Square During 2011 versus 2021.....	109

**LIST OF FIGURES**  
**(Continued)**

<b>Figure</b>	<b>Page</b>
6.1    Screenshots of the Interactive Platform Created by the Author.....	114

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before 1869, Tahrir Square was an empty space except for some fields and gardens, which were often flooded by the Nile. Over the years, its design and use changed in significant ways, under the direction of both monarchs (1869- 1953) and presidents (1953- 2021). By the turn of the twentieth century, it became what it is now – a roundabout (Owen, 1997). In January 2011, it gained world attention when thousands of people occupied Tahrir Square for 18 days, making it both a place of protest and of community. But this was not the only time the square had been used in this manner. In 1946, Egyptians clashed with British officers who occupied the military barracks in the square. In 1952, 1967, 1977, 2003, 2011, and 2013 people made Tahrir Square their platform for expressing their political and social grievances. In 2021, Tahrir appears to be, at first glance, an accessible public space but it is also carefully surveilled and monitored by police. So from being a well-recognized platform for political expression in 2011 it has become a controlled space that, through redesign, was converted to a regulated touristic venue.

The design and use of Tahrir Square from 1869 to 2021 reflect the history of modern Cairo and, arguably, the political and social history of Egypt generally: the rise and fall of the monarchy, modernism, colonialism, nationalism, capitalism, and globalization. This dissertation examines these changes in Tahrir's design and use from its foundation as a roundabout in modern Cairo in 1869 to early 2021.

## 1.1 The Roundabout

While being, indeed, a square Tahrir has also been a roundabout, as it was in 2011 and as it is now. Roundabouts are western inventions to regulate traffic. People use the terms roundabout and traffic circle interchangeably. A roundabout or a traffic circle is a round space where three or more roads intersect and that requires traffic to go around it rather than going straight. During the second half of the nineteenth century, western city planners introduced roundabouts to modern city fabrics that included intersecting wide boulevards and axial streets (Todd, 1988; Weizman, 2019). However, movement around these traffic circles was in all directions. And the tremendous urban growth and the profusion of automobiles exacerbated traffic congestion; thus, there had to be a practical solution to control traffic. In 1903, French Architect Eugène Hénard proposed roundabouts as functional urban design elements that he punctured *Haussmann's* Paris with. In 1905, the traffic circle entered New York City when William Eno resolved traffic congestion in the city by inventing the first one-way rotary system at Columbus Circle, the traffic circle *par excellence*. By 1909, Unwin and Parker brought the roundabout to American suburbia by using it in Letchworth, the first garden city they designed. Since then, roundabouts proliferated worldwide. In the case of the Middle East and Arab World, *rond-points* entered with the *haussmannian* city planning that either local or western planners implemented in several cities, including Istanbul, Algiers, Damascus, and Cairo.

Roundabouts often evolve from being only a means of easing traffic congestion to carrying symbolic meaning as well (Todd, 1988). Frequently, they serve as bases for

commemorative or emblematic monuments that contribute to forming their respective cities and countries' identities. For instance, the triumphal arch crowning Paris' Place de l'étoile or Charle de Gaulle roundabout is a symbol of France's national identity that commemorates the victory of Napoleon I in the Battle of Austerlitz. Columbus Circle, the roundabout in New York City, pays homage to Christopher Columbus by carrying his statue. The roundabout offers a perfect setting for a monument that vehicles circle, suggesting a processional quality embedded in the regular circular motion of cars.

## **1.2 Conceptual Framework**

AlSayyad (2011) and Weizman (2019) refer to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution as a "roundabout revolution." AlSayyad (2011) does not delve into the definition of the roundabout, but he labels the Egyptian uprising as such since revolutions do not only emerge in cyberspace and that the revolution in Egypt cannot only be labeled as a "Facebook Revolution." AlSayyad echoes cybernetic theoretician Manuel Castells (1996) argument about the necessity of a physical space and "real world" activity that cyberspace complement but does not substitute. Thus, AlSayyad implies that the uprising stemmed from the roundabout where authorities and people manifest all the political actions. Weizman (2019) complicates the terminology of the "roundabout revolution" by applying a theoretical lens. He explains that the *raison d'être* of the roundabout was originally functional. It is an element of people's self-regulation. Instead of traffic lights and police officers, the roundabout made it up to the drivers to manage their movements. This resonates with Michel Foucault's (1984) theories on governmentality which entails creating a framework for people's behaviors and interactions. In this case, the roundabout

is a comical diagram of the Panopticon, a circular structure where the circumference is constantly surveilled by the center. Weizman offers an interesting Foucauldian reading of the “roundabout revolutions” in which roundabouts act as “inverted panopticons.” He explains how this concept applies to Tahrir Square when he wrote “On January 25, the order of the square was turned inside out: its center began delivering the services usually provided by the institutional buildings on its circumference.” (p. 44). Protestors erected a tent city in the roundabout, which people referred to as the “Tahrir Republic,” a miniature Egyptian society where social and commercial activities took place among different socio-economic groups.

This dissertation examines the production of Tahrir Square using a framework that combines Weizman’s Foucauldian interpretation of Tahrir’s roundabout and Lefebvre’s (1992) conceptualization of space as perceived, conceived, and lived. The *perceived space* is the theoretical perception or imagination of the space as a social construct. In other words, it is how individuals perceive the built environment based on their previous experiences imbued within their society’s spatial conditions and social practices. It is the reading of the *conceived space*. The *conceived space* is the physical space constructed by the government and planners, in this case, the square and its roundabout. Finally, the *lived space* is people’s interactions with the conceived physical space. Lefebvre suggests that the lived space is the space of resistance where the power dynamics constantly change. Several scholars framed Tahrir Square’s uprising within these definitions. Hussam Salama (2013) analyzes Tahrir Square during the 2011 Revolution through Lefebvre’s categorization of space. However, he only applies this theoretical framework on the 18 days of the uprising. Riphagen and Woltering (2018) use

the same spatial triad in examining Tahrir Square by stretching Salama's timeline from 2011 to 2014. Similarly, Bar'el (2017) investigates Tahrir Square as a space of people's resilience against the state's power by referencing Lefebvre conceived and lived spaces. This research covers a wider timeframe that studies the "occupation" of Tahrir either by authorities or people covering the square from its foundation around 1869 until 2021.

### **1.3 Dissertation Organization and Significance**

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters following this introduction. Chapter Two presents the research questions and the methods used to answer them. Chapter Three is a review of the existing literature on the history of the design and use of public squares in the Middle East and North Africa. Chapter Four provides a historical and social overview Downtown Cairo, the district where Tahrir Square is located. Chapter Five is the core of this dissertation, presenting the history of the design and use of the square. It is divided into seven sections according to time periods in the history of the square: Founded (1867- 1869), Colonized (1882- 1952), Nationalized (1952- 1970), Globalized (1970- 2011), Occupied (2011- 2013), Surveilled (2013- 2019), and Exhibited (2019- 2021). Implications of the research and suggestions for future research are presented in Chapter Six.

This study contributes to the existing scholarship on Tahrir Square, which often focuses on it during times of political unrest when people occupy it to express their discontent. However, Tahrir Square offers a close understanding of Cairo's social, cultural, political, and economic conditions that culminate and are represented in one space. Unpacking the history of the design and use of the square unfolds the larger



history of modern Cairo. It reveals power dynamics and urban planning policies that can be digested by closely reading the square and tracking its change in design and use over time.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study investigates the history of the design and use of Tahrir Square from its foundation around 1869 until 2021 and how the changes in this one public space reflect the larger social, cultural, economic, and political changes in Cairo, that, in turn, affected the design and use of the Square. In this way, it is possible to understand Cairo's modern history by analyzing a public square that represents this history.

To understand this 150 year-long history, this dissertation relies on archival and contemporary sources of data (See Table 2.1).

**Table 2.1** Research Questions and Sources of Data

Research Question	Sources of Data
1) What is the social, cultural, and political history of Cairo from 1869 to 2021?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Secondary sources in English, Arabic, and French (books and scholarly and newspapers articles)</li><li>• Primary Sources (19th and 20th-century travelers' accounts and diaries, -- photographs, postcards, Google Earth satellite images, and maps, stamps, advertisements, film, video footage of political and social events, and documentaries)</li><li>• Semi-structured interviews with architectural historians</li></ul>
2) How did the physical context of Tahrir Square change from 1869 to 2021?	
3) What was the original design of Tahrir Square (1869) and how did its design change over time?	
4) How did the use of Tahrir Square change between 1869 and 2021?	
5) What were the larger physical, social and economic conditions of Egypt that helped explain the changes in the design and use of Tahrir Square from 1869 to 2021?	
6) What is the design and use of Tahrir Square in 2019, 2020, 2021?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Site observations in December of 2019 and 2020</li><li>• Informal interviews with users of the sites in 2021</li><li>• Semi-structured interview with Tahrir Square 2019 redesign architect</li><li>• Video footage in December of 2019 and 2020</li><li>• Photography in 2019, 2020, and 2021</li><li>• Newspaper articles and videos</li><li>• Social media photographs in 2019, 2020, and 2021 (Facebook and Instagram)</li></ul>

The history of Tahrir Square gained particular attention from various scholars, historians, urbanists, theorists, and certainly politicians after the 2011 Revolution. This study examined articles, published post-January 2011 about the history of the square and

its surroundings by prominent architectural historians specializing in the Middle East and more specifically in Cairo, including Nezar AlSayyad (2011a, 2011b, 2012), Nasser Rabbat (2011, 2012), and Mohamed elShahed (2011a, 2011b). One exception to the scholarship written after the 2011 Revolution is an article published in 1997 by historian E. Roger Owen (1997) who was extremely thorough in providing a detailed history of Tahrir Square from 1870 to 1970. Several books in Arabic written by two Egyptian historians, Abbas al-Tarbili (2000, 2003) and Fathy elHadidi (2013, 2017), served as useful sources that presented a comprehensive history of Cairo and a detailed chronology of the history and change in design and use of Tahrir Square and its surrounding buildings.

The research also relied on other books by renowned historians who wrote about the modern history of 19th, 20th, and 21st century Cairo, including Janet Abu-Lughod (1971), Andre Raymond, Mercedes Volait, Galila Al-Kadi, AlSayyad (2011b), David Sims (Sims, 2012), Diane Singerman (2009; Singerman & Amar, 2006), Farha Ghannam (2002), and Mohamed ElShahed (Elshahed, 2020). These books in English and French provide both important information and useful insights regarding social, cultural, political, and economic changes in Cairo from 1805 to 2010.

Egypt gained increasing attention from western travelers following the French Expedition in 1798, which exposed Egypt to the world. Among the frequent late 19th and early 20th centuries American and European travelers to Egypt are Karl Baedeker (1898), James Breasted (1908), A. B. Guerville (1906), John Murray (1888), Stanley Lane-Poole (1918), and Robert Kelly (1910) . The researcher used those travelers' accounts that offer detailed descriptions of travelers' experience of Cairo's modern

squares when they visited it between 1888 and 1918. They described what they observed while visiting Cairo by recounting who occupied the rond-point at Ismailia quarter, how the buildings looked like in terms of their design and scale, and how the modern Cairene quarters were different from indigenous ones. They also described the landscape, streets, traffic, and sounds besides giving general contextual information on Cairo's political and social life at the time they visited it.

Egyptian newspaper articles were helpful in describing some events and pivotal moments, especially during the 21st century and after the 2011 Revolution. Among the national newspapers are *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, and *Al-Sorouq*. Reliable web pages, such as Cairoobserver (<https://cairoobserver.com/>) by elShahed, La Fabrique du Caire Moderne (<https://sites.duke.edu/cairemoderne/>) by Volait and Adam Mestyan, Jadaliyya (<https://www.jadaliyya.com/>), MadaMasr (<https://www.madamasr.com/>), and Egyptian Streets (<https://egyptianstreets.com/>) were also useful for collecting data and up to date information about specific events and buildings in Tahrir. Cairoobserver is an online platform that encourages stirring conversations and debates about Cairo's architecture and urbanism among scholars, students, architects, residents, and visitors. The platform also presents and critically analyzes contemporary topics and events concerning urban design in Cairo. So it is a useful source for current and historical information about changes in Tahrir Square and the downtown area where it is located. Similarly, La Fabrique du Caire Moderne focuses on Cairo's urban development in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is a collaboration between *L'information visuelle et textuelle en histoire de l'art* and the history department of Duke University, which offers brief but informative articles about specific areas or buildings in downtown Cairo or Cairo de la

*belle époque*. The platform is comprehensive since it collects sources in English, Arabic, and French. In addition, it supplies various additional references on 19th and 20th century Cairo. Similarly, Jadaliyya is an online magazine by the Arab Studies Institute that publishes articles in English, Arabic, and French about the Arab World. This ezine provides critical analysis, especially on social and political topics in Egypt and since Tahrir Square was under the spotlight following the 2011 Revolution, a number of articles on the uprising were helpful in discerning eyewitness accounts on how Egyptians and authorities used the square from 2011 to 2016 (Ghannam, 2016; Rashad, 2016; Ziada, 2015). Mada Masr and Egyptian Streets are Cairo-based online magazines that offer analytical insights on contemporary news and events in Cairo. Contributors include Egyptian urban designers, architects, and urban planners who discuss urban changes, interventions, and developments in Cairo.

The researcher also conducted semi-structured interviews with urban and architectural historians who specialize in the Middle East: Professor Nezar alSayyad, Professor Emeritus of Architecture, City Planning, Urban Design, and Urban History at University of California in Berkeley and Professor Nasser Rabbat, the head of Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in the summer of 2020. The interviews included specific questions on the origin and history of Tahrir Square and how it shaped and was shaped by its surrounding buildings (see Appendix A for the interviews' protocol). The information they contributed was vital in understanding Tahrir Square's design and use, particularly since these scholars had visited the square in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s and hence were able to indicate how people use the square and assess its redesigns. Moreover, since the two scholars are

well versed in the Arab World they compared Tahrir Square along with other public spaces in Cairo with public squares in Arab cities, which enriched the study of existing literature in this dissertation on public squares in the MENA Region.

In addition, the researcher held a semi-structured interview, in March 2021, with Mariam AbdelDayem, who is the design team leader of the 2019 Tahrir Square redesign at Shehab Mazhar Architects. AbdelDayem gave thorough information about their design process from the conceptual stage until completion and she provided specific data on their design approach and concept, and the variety of landscape design elements the architect implemented to fulfill some spatial requirements related to security and accessibility. She also talked about the design collaborators and discussed some of the design and execution challenges.

Newspapers, and travelogues, historical and contemporary maps and photographs were essential primary sources of data for understanding and visualizing the physical changes of the square and how people used it during different historical periods in the 19th and 20th centuries. The researcher used maps from Gallica of the National Library of France (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/>), the Library of Congress (<https://www.loc.gov/>), the American University in Cairo's Rare Books Library (<http://digitalcollections.aucegypt.edu>), University of Texas Libraries (<http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world.html>), the Digital Collection of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (<https://uwm.edu/lib-collections/>), the Egyptian Surveying Authority, and the Egyptian Geographical Association. Open Street Map and Google Earth provided accurate maps from 2000 to 2021. The researcher used the time slider

feature on Google Earth to track and compare Tahrir design changes in 2000, 2003, 2011, 2016, 2019, and 2021.

In addition to postcards, historical photographs from Gallica, the Australian War Memorial (<https://www.awm.gov.au/>), Travelers' in the Middle East Archive of Rice University (<https://scholarship.rice.edu/>), The Memory of Modern Egypt online database for Bibliotheca Alexandrina (<http://modernegypt.bibalex.org/>), the Digital Collection of the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, Getty Images (<https://www.gettyimages.com/>), Shutterstock (<https://www.shutterstock.com/>), Flickr (<https://www.flickr.com/>), and the collection of a number of Egyptian and foreign researchers, such as Harrison Forman, Caroline Seymour-John Samir Raafat and Maged Farag (<http://www.egy.com/>). To find relevant maps, photographs, and other audi-visual materials including short news videos, recorded interviews, documentaries, and videos published on Youtube of funerals and other activities taking place in the square. The researcher implemented a number of keyword searches. Those keywords ranged from a very broad word like Cairo or more specific searches of renowned buildings on the square, such as the Egyptian Museum, The American University, the Mogama, or the Nile Hilton in English, French, or Arabic depending on the digital archive. Besides historical photographs, postcards were collected from HipPostcard (<https://www.hippostcard.com/>) and ebay, providing aerial and wide views that illustrate the square design and surrounding buildings.

Using AutoCad and Illustrator, the collected maps were reviewed and edited since some maps were missing details or buildings. Seven maps of seven time periods in the history of the square were reproduced in figure ground. This representation helps in understanding Tahrir Square development and change. Another set of maps was created



depicting the use of the square either by the people or authorities and showing their concentration areas. These maps along with pictures of the square during different time periods were used to produce a timeline that encapsulates how Tahrir acts as a microcosm for Cairo's modern history. This method of layering of maps, pictures, and pivotal events in the history of the square helped in grasping its multifaceted social, political, cultural, and economic dimensions.

The variety of methods used in this dissertation to study the history of Tahrir Square included studying primary and secondary sources ranging from photographs, postcards, maps, travelogues, and site observations. Each provided facts and information in the history of the design and use of the square. The data collected with the use of these methods were used to create a visual timeline of Tahrir Square's history from 1874 to 2021. The mapping method that combined maps with contemporary pictures and key historical events was particularly useful for tracing changes in design and use of Tahrir over different time periods. First, each figure ground map presents the urban and architectural morphology of the square and the density of buildings and their individual locations at a particular time. Second, studying changes in the square's design and functions across different time periods reveal larger social and political changes in the country. Third, this timeline representation method presents layers of information on the square planning, traffic, landscape design, and people, enabling us to discern who has agency on Tahrir. For instance, the juxtaposition of maps, images, and information of the seven time periods of Tahrir's history show that the square's major morphological and design transformation occurred between 1947 and 1987, which was a period of transition and major political and social change in Egypt from being a monarchy to becoming a

republic. The timeline also reveals that by the 1980s the Egyptian government became more interested in resolving traffic and transportation problems by magnifying Tahrir's role as a public transportation hub and a central traffic roundabout besides increasing the number of parking garages. The maps show that buildings and bus stops gradually encroached on the park and planted green areas and turned them to, first a construction site in the 1990s and early 2000s, and finally replacing most of the green areas with fake grass.

Some Egyptian movies that were produced in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were useful sources since they give a visual representation of how people used Tahrir Square during these periods of time. For instance, a movie released in 1973 called "Hammam El-Malatili" starts with a series of shots that show a motion picture with a sensory experience of the pedestrian and vehicular circulation, and the sounds of Tahrir Square and downtown Cairo during that time. Scenes in "Al-Tha'r" movie produced in 1982, depict the protagonist walking around Tahrir Square, where people and their activities are shown in the background. *Terrorism and Kabab* (Arafa, 1992) is another movie that gives an account of the design and use of Tahrir Square in 1992 because it was mostly shot in Mogama building and its vicinity.

Facebook and Instagram were used to collect contemporary photos, particularly after the 2011 Revolution. Most of the photos date from January 2011 to January 2021. These pictures along with their captions give a good sense of how Egyptians and tourists, who share their photographs of the square with the public, use and perceive the square. The primary and secondary data sources were cross-referenced for accuracy and to trace the design and use of the square relying on both literature and visual materials.

The researcher also relied on on-site observations, photographs, and video footage that documented the design and use of the square in December 2019, December 2020, and early January 2021. On the evening of December 19, 2019, photographs and videos that the researcher took, recorded the social activities in the different areas of the square, which was still undergoing renovation.

A year later, on December 12, 2020, the researcher made another site visit to the redesigned square. The police and a private security company were not allowing people to sit in the area or to take pictures. So on Monday, December 14, using a Go-Pro camera, the researcher created a timelapse video of one open and redesigned area of Tahrir, that is the public space in front of Mogama. The video recording, taken from a balcony on the 8th floor of a hotel that overlooked the square, started before noon and ended at 6 pm. That same day, the researcher drew a rough map of the square and marked down a few activities that she observed from the hotel balcony. During a few walks around the square in the afternoon, the researcher made additional observations and recorded some of the uses of the square using the voice record feature on a cellphone device and also by taking written notes. In addition, the researcher conducted some informal interviews with two shop owners of stores overlooking the square and a worker at Mogama. The questions to the shop owners addressed demographic information about their visitors about whether they are tourists or locals. Other questions were about why or for what purpose do people visit or come to the square and if the number of clients is larger on weekdays or weekends. The researcher asked the Mogama' worker about what functions were taking place in the building, the number of people who entered and for what reasons, and how the relocation of some of the functions of Mogama' affected the

number of its visitors. Since the square was under heavy surveillance, the researcher could not record the interviews or take notes while conducting them, hence, notes were written and voice recorded right after the informal conversations were conducted.

### CHAPTER 3

#### PUBLIC SQUARES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Before reviewing the literature on public squares in the MENA region, the Arabic word for square, which is *maydan* needs to be defined. Oxford dictionary defines *maydan*, or *maidan* in Persian and Urdu, as “ a marketplace, park, or other open space in or near a town; an esplanade or parade ground” (“Maidan, n.,” n.d.). Similarly, Rabbat (2004) explains the history of *maydans* in Cairo by describing them as large grassed open spaces that Muslim Sultans used for polo games and equestrian military exercises starting in the 12th century. In the Iranian context, Mehan explains that *maidans*, founded as early as 9 B. C., were similar to Greek Agoras, which were economical and cultural city centers. Rabbat (2012) also indicates that public spaces in Islamic cities can be compared to Greek Agoras that were enclosed within mosques sanctuaries. Mehan (Mehan, 2016) and Rabbat (Rabbat, 2012) state that, historically, *maydans* were either located at the city center or near the city gates.

According to AlSayyad (2011b), public spaces were usually the open spaces in front of mosques that could accommodate the overflow of people during prayers and other religious events and celebrations. In that way, public squares in the Middle East were extensions of religious spaces until the 19th century. The western definition of public space, including squares did not arrive in the Middle East or North Africa until the beginning of its modernization in the mid-19th century, which was driven by colonial influence.

AlSayyad (personal communication, June 2020) and Rabbat indicate that public squares in the MENA region are very similar in their meaning and use. Rabbat particularly noted that public spaces in Arab cities, including Cairo, Rabbat, Marrakech, Tunis, Aleppo, Amman, and Beirut share the aspect of Arabness that is manifested in the same language and cultural norms and which makes the use and adaptation of public squares very similar among those cities. He indicates that Cairo is only different from the other Arab cities in terms of its scale and density. This distinction is crucial since the scale of the public square and the number of people occupying it accentuate its political and social role and symbolism. That is why, following the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Tahrir Square became the epicenter of the Arab Spring movement.

To better understand the development of Tahrir Square, this dissertation presents a review of studies on the history of the design and use of public squares in the MENA region. Some studies traced the history of the development of squares and their symbolism in many cities including Istanbul, Tehran, Dubai, Yamama, Beirut, Kuwait, Tripoli, Ankara, and Oran. In some cities including Tehran and Ankara, squares were originally social and commercial places where people convened and shopped and then later with the 19th and 20th-century modernization wave they turned into traffic roundabouts. Mehan (2016), Daou (2016), Alarabe (2016), Elmenghawi (2016), Khalaf (2013), Bayraktar (2013), and Gül et al. (2014), traced the history of public squares in Iran, Lebanon, Kuwait, Libya, Bahrain, and Turkey and their modernization and change in use by focusing on one or two squares in Tehran, Beirut, Kuwait City, Tripoli, Manama, Ankara, and Istanbul. By providing a historical timeline for the squares, they demonstrate that public squares changed from being merely vacant open spaces to traffic

junctions or transitional areas that lack a sense of place and then to platforms for political expression, and finally to venues for interaction, social and commercial exchange or revert back to being a traffic junction, such as the case of Kuwait City, Manama, and Ankara.

Mehan (2016) and Lak & Hakimian (2019) discuss the story of a prominent square in Tehran, Baharestan Square, which used to be an empty space in front of a garden that was located outside of the city in 1807. Later with the city development in 1868, the garden and the square became part of the city. By the turn of the 20th-century educational buildings and a mosque, where important religious events occurred, were built on the garden grounds. With the establishment of the Parliament the square gained political significance and hence the rise of political and social demonstrations. Thus, Baharestan Square became a common space for gathering, celebrations of religious and national events, and also a stage for protest.

Daou (2016) traces the human occupation of Sahat-al Borj Square, in Beirut city center, throughout history from 1772 to the early 2000s, focusing on the second half of the 20th century when fundamental changes to the square occurred. Similar to Baharestan Square, Daou indicates that Sahat Square is a venue for commercial exchange and public encounters as well as a space for celebrations and demonstrations. People installed makeshift markets, theatres, and offices. But at times of political unrest, such as the 1975 civil war, the square turns into a battlefield.

In similar veins, Alrabe (2016) investigated political dissent movements within two squares in Kuwait City, Al-Safat and Al-Erada, throughout history and their appropriation by both political movements and the authorities. Alrabe indicated that, in

the Kuwaiti social context, public squares functioned as forums where rulers and society figures discussed political, economic, and social issues. She explained that Al-Safat Square's function altered from space for trade to an arena for violence and then to a parking lot, then a place for protests and then the government employed spatial tactics to physically isolate public spaces and limit demonstrations. She also pointed out that people appropriated social media as a medium for political expression, while the authorities used the physical public space for spectacular staged celebrations to reinstate their power and control (Figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1** Al-Safat Square

Source: Wikimapia. <http://wikimapia.org/1293056/Safat-Square#/photo/4112951> (Retrieved on March, 2021)

Elmenghawi (2016) traced the history and alteration of design and function of Martyr Square in Tripoli by relying on archival materials, observations, and interviews. She indicated that the square has changed drastically over time and that, similar to squares in Tehran, Beirut, and Kuwait City, its uses ranged from commercial to political activities. She also stated that Martyr Square is a political space for celebrations of the



toppling of Gaddafi in 2011. It was also a space to demonstrate support for the regime before the 2011 revolution.

Similar to Alrabe, Khalaf narrates a similar history of the Pearl Roundabout or Square in Manama, Bahrain. Following the 2011 uprising in Tunisia and Egypt, Pearl Roundabout changed from a central traffic circle to a political square for what Khalaf argues is the most significant anti-government protest in Bahrain's recent history. After shutting down the demonstrations using tear gas and implementing violence, the government demolished the square monument, which symbolized the uprising, and reverted it back into a traffic intersection after surrounding it with barricades (see Figure 3.2).



**Figure 3.2** Pearl Square before and after the 2011 uprising.

Source: <https://bahrain.viewbook.com/> and theodora.com (Retrieved on March, 2021)

Bayraktar (2013) also pointed out that one of the two squares she studied was a venue for national struggles and demonstrations. She examined the history of two squares in Ankara, Ulus and Kızılay squares, and their change as a result of the process of modernization. She stated that the squares changed from being meeting spaces to traffic intersections. She also tracked the change of users in both squares where one is being used by low-income groups while the other by middle to high-income groups. Her

surveys showed that, in recent years, one square was being used mostly by women since it is adjacent to a middle school and a shopping center while the other square is used more by students. Bayraktar also explained in her research that one of the squares she studied was a venue for clashes and protests.

Taksim Square gained tremendous exposure following the 2013 Taksim Square Gezi Park demonstrations. Batuman (2015), Gül et al. (2014), (Göle, 2013), and Turan (Varela, 2020) explain how Turks occupied Taksim Square in May 2013 to oppose the government neo-liberal plans to build a shopping mall on the site of Gezi Park. In this case, the square is adjacent to a park, like Baharestan Square in Tehran, but occupies a more central location within Istanbul (see Figure 2.3). Taksim is located in the cosmopolitan secular area of Istanbul that reflected the republican modern urban design after 1923. The buildings surrounding the square, which were erected in the 1950s and 1960s, emphasized the neo-liberal political agenda emulated in hotels and cultural structures, including the Hilton Hotel and the Opera House.



**Figure 3.3** Taksim Square.

Source: <https://www.greenprophet.com/> (Retrieved on March, 2021)

Another Arab square that underwent modernization followed by neo-liberalization is Al-Manara Square connecting two cities in Palestine, Ramallah and Al-Bireh. (Awad et al., 2018) and Shibli (2006) study this prominent square as a manifestation of urban restructuring and development in Palestine. While Shibli traces the political and social history of the square by presenting pivotal moments in the history of Palestine, Awad and colleagues conducted fieldwork using site observations and interviews with stakeholders besides archival research to study the urban transformation of Al-Manara. Both groups of researchers demonstrate how the square acts as an important node for social exchange and political conflict.

In her dissertation, Kettaf (2013) investigated the formation and production of public space in Oran, Algeria with an emphasis on public squares. She explained how squares were imported from the European model and were controlled by forces of colonization and then observed the contemporary use of these squares. Through historical and contemporary maps and photographs, Kettaf identified the different activities that take place within various squares ranging from sitting to strolling or biking to socializing and the social, cultural, and recreational events that occur including concerts, festivals, and celebrations that aim at restoring the Algerian identity.

Lak and Hakimian (2019), Khalaf (2013), Gul (Gül et al., 2014), (Awad et al., 2018), and Alrabe (2016) address issues of urban decay in their studies of public squares in Istanbul, Yamama, and Ramallah. They explain how the central squares they studied were becoming obsolete since the governments are implementing plans to deactivate them as social and recreational centers and are reducing them to either surveilled traffic circles or shrinking open spaces undergoing neo-liberal projects.

Numerous squares in the MENA region underwent common historical urban developments. They experienced similar processes of urban change that several historical events induced. Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Libya, and Algeria were Ottoman territories that colonization or western urban models affected. This spread of modernization schemes activated the squares as political platforms that the authorities converted into controlled spaces, that are usually surrounded by neo-liberal developments.

Dubai also has a different story of the development and function of public squares. Elsheshtawy (2014) examined the origins of Nasser Square in Dubai and how it contributed to the emergence of the city as an urban center. He analyzed archival materials, such as historical photographs, media reports, and travelogues as well as conducting interviews with square users, mapping exercises, and informal observations. His observational study reflects the diversity of Dubai as a global city where he found a co-existence of multiple ethnic and age groups performing different activities. For instance, Chinese adults sit on benches and socialize while their children play in front of them. Egyptian children play soccer on the lawn while some adults stand along the edge observing passers by and people coming out of the subway station. The square also used to be a center for commercial activities, but this role has changed with businesses only located around the square but not within it.

Most researchers did not study the design of the squares in terms of layout and landscape or architectural elements. Khalaf (2013), Shibli (2006), and, Mehan (2016) discuss the symbolism of the central sculptures to their respective squares and how they are associated with a certain identity. However, they did not provide information on the squares' layout or other design elements, including seating or plantation for instance.

Mehan (2016), Gül et al. (2014), Awad et al. (2018), Bayraktar (2013) mention the physical urban change in the squares by focusing on their surrounding buildings and not necessarily how the internal design of the square changed.

The origin and development of public squares in the Middle East and North Africa is consistent and similar as one can draw many parallels from the literature on a number of those squares. Squares within cities with long urban histories shared similar evolution and change patterns. First, they usually started as empty spaces that with time either changed to trade venues where people also met and socialized or to traffic circles as a result of modern urban planning. This is more evident in European colonies, such as Tripoli and Oran or cities that were influenced by colonial or haussmannian urban planning including Cairo and Istanbul. Later during the 20th-century and with the rise of political movements, squares transformed into vital stages for expression and dissent or even for the celebration of political events. Some of these squares, such as Tahrir, squares in Oran, and in Ankara are now also used as commercial and recreational spaces where people shop, meet, interact, and even picnic. Some of the squares, such as Tahrir, Bharestan, and Nasser are vital transportation hubs that people use or pass by on their daily commute. The researchers on squares also demonstrate how these squares are a reflection of the state of their respective countries. For instance, during times of political instabilities, they are places where people go to protest and to express themselves, and during other times they are social spaces that people enjoy. Some of the researchers discussed how the socio-political conditions and their changes caused changes in the squares dynamics. In addition, in some instances, such as in the case of Tehran, the surroundings and the adjacent buildings introduced new purposes to Baharestan Square,

which gained political significance after establishing the parliament building and then after building some commercial structures it became a shopping venue (Mehan, 2017).

In the MENA region, governments and people have always been using public squares as a stage for expression. For governments, public squares are venues where they exert their political power as manifested in square designs and surveillance or through buildings, such as the case of Taksim, Tahrir, Bharestan, Al-Safat and Al-Erada squares. As for the people, squares are platforms for their discontent or endorsement of the regime, including the cases of Martyr, Taksim, Bahrestan, Al-Manara, and Pearl.

By tracing the urban history of public squares in several Middle Eastern and North African cities, researchers indicate how the changes in these squares reflect the broader political, social, cultural, and economic landscape of their respective cities. Most of these squares act as a microcosm for their respective cities and arguably for their countries. Their urban change and series of transformation are archetypes that embody urban change in larger contexts.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT IN DOWNTOWN CAIRO (1805- 2021)**

#### **4.1 Modern Cairo (1805- 1952)**

During the years between 1805 and 1952, Cairo witnessed the biggest transformation in its urban planning history. This section unpacks this revolutionary change focusing on key moments in history that profoundly shaped Cairo's urban structure. The first modernization phase is during the reign of Mohamed Ali, the second and arguably the most important period, which is the implementation stage, came with the rule of Khedive (viceroy) Ismail in 1873, and the last period was after the British occupation in 1882 and until Egypt's independence in 1952. It was during Ismail's tenure that the preliminary physical layout of Tahrir Square, or Ismailia Square then, came into fruition. The chapter focuses on Cairo's Downtown where Tahrir Square lies.

West el-Balad (literally meaning city center), Downtown Cairo, and Khedival Cairo are different names that Egyptians and researchers use interchangeably to refer to the modern quarters that Ismail conceived during his reign and which marks the area sandwiched between the medieval Fatimid City and the Nile River.

##### **4.1.1 The origins of the Modern City**

In order to understand the urban transformation in Cairo during the nineteenth century, the relationship between modernization and colonization within the Egyptian context should be explained. In his book "Colonizing Egypt", Timothy Mitchell (1991) explains how the orient was perceived and represented by Europe including France and Britain. Those countries tried to impose their abstract ideals and physical structure on Egypt and

create a certain order that was depicted in the world exhibitions. This colonial order was first envisioned by Napoleon I, when he first landed in Egypt in 1798, and was applied to the army, then to education and most notably for the purpose of this dissertation on streets and city structure (Abu-Lughod, 1971). Therefore, the colonization of Egypt led to a reform, which was reflected in the modernization of its cities and culture. Although the French occupied Egypt for only three brief years from 1798 to 1801, they had a deep impact that unfolded later in the mid-nineteenth century. Their influence is vividly present in twentieth-century Cairo. Al-Jabarti, who was a contemporary philosopher and scholar who studied closely the French Expedition and lived during the 18th and 19th centuries wrote the following in 1798:

“The order has been given to light the streets and suqs at night with lamps...There were also instructions to sweep and water the streets, and to maintain the cleanliness of the public way in the matter of garbage and refuse.” (Raymond, 2000, p. 295).

This resonates with what Mitchell elaborated on in his book in which he applied a Foucauldian lens in exploring the methods that were implemented in Egypt at that time to maintain order, surveillance, and discipline through introducing new types of institutions including schools and through the new layout of the modern city. Mohamed Ali and particularly later Khedive Ismail translated the concept of the French colonial order and applied it to Cairo by converting it into an imperfect Parisian model. The idea of France being the first model of westernization for Egypt came from Ali's collaboration with French experts for reforms and the educational missions sent to France. Among the scholars sent there were Ismail and Ali Mubarak, who was later the city planner of Cairo during the late nineteenth century. In terms of urban reforms, Ismail had the greatest impact during this era. During his reign from 1863 to 1879, conditions were favorable



with the cotton boom and the Suez Canal that was about to be inaugurated; thus, it was time to renovate the capital city and to materialize his notion of modern Cairo, which was to be planned *à la française*, with wide streets, boulevards, open spaces, and public parks (Ghannam, 2002). The Khedive wanted to impress his European audience by showcasing the newly developed streets and urban spaces of Cairo.

Another reason why Ali and his grandson decided to implement the French order is health, physical hygiene, and poor infrastructure. Paris was a decaying city so as medieval Cairo according to its rulers. Gottmann (1964) further elaborates on this phenomenon of urban decay through his concept of “obsolescence,” which he claims to be a fundamental reason why the outdated and obsolete city should be updated and replaced or complemented with a clean, sanitary, and modern one with the proper infrastructure, light, air, and architecture. For Ismail, Cairo was not equipped or ready to receive European visitors that had to be impressed by how modern and developed Egypt’s capital was. So, he had to cover the obsolete medieval city by a modern facade that would rival the ones possessed by world capitals.

#### **4.1.2 Erecting the Modern Capital**

The concept of modern city planning cannot be discussed in any city without first explaining its principles and objectives and dealing with its origins in Paris –the exemplar of 19th century modernization. Around the second half of the 19th century, and specifically between 1853 and 1870, Paris witnessed what is arguably the biggest transformation in urban history when Napoleon III along with his prefect *de la Seine* Georges Haussmann decided to impose a new urban plan on the existing fabric of the city– showcasing a modern imperial capital (Bergdoll, 2000). The new plan came as a

response to the poor health and dreadful infrastructural conditions that Paris was suffering from at that time (Pinkney, 1958). Thus, the aim of this reform was to bring hygiene and sanitation to the city, light, and cross-ventilation. Circulation was also key in Paris' remodeling. Consequently, a network of clean wide tree-lined streets that radiated from a number of *rond-points* was proposed. Also, railway stations were introduced to link the city to the other industrial villages surrounding it. Connections were not only provided to train stations, but also to vital nodes and city monuments that created urban vistas on main avenues and boulevards. Municipal buildings, such as schools, hospitals, and churches were also projected. In addition, parks and open public spaces were crucial components in the refashioning of Paris since they acted as urban lungs to the city and offered recreational grounds that aimed at improving the physical and the moral health of the citizens and that also helped in distracting the working class from possible social or political unrest (Bergdoll, 2000).

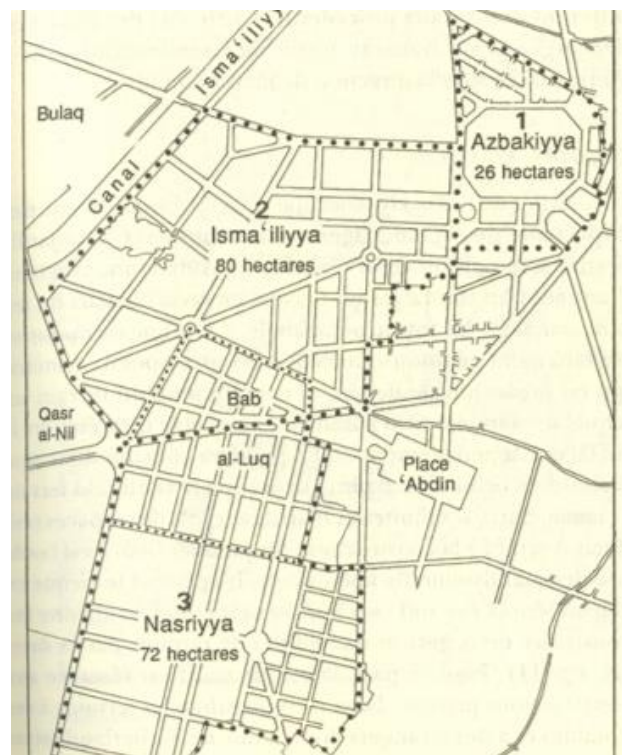
The *haussmannization* of Paris had a ripple effect on cities around the world as Paris became a model that began to be replicated and implemented on leading cities and Cairo was one of the first on that list. The story of building modern Cairo began with Ismail Pasha's accession to power in 1863 (Raymond, 2000). Originally, the vision for a modern industrial nation preceded Ismail and was first perceived by his grandfather, Muhammad Ali, who ruled Egypt between 1805 and 1848 right after the French expedition (AlSayyad et al., 2005). But it wasn't until Ismail came to power that this vision was implemented. In 1865, Ismail established the water and gas companies to supply Cairo with clean potable water and proper infrastructure and to provide the city

with gas light. Cairo was then physically equipped to enter the modern era of city building and urban development.

The idea to transform Cairo into a modern capital crystallized when Ismail visited Paris' Exposition Universelle in 1867 to inaugurate the Egyptian pavilion. There, he was confronted and fascinated by Haussmann's well studied, embellished, and organized street system that highlighted prominent *places* and unveiled focal public buildings. He came back determined to turn Cairo into a "Paris along the Nile " within less than two years since he wanted to showcase his global modern city to the world during the inauguration ceremony of the Suez Canal, which was to take place in 1869 (AlSayyad et. al., 2005). Thus, Ismail strived to display an urban image that reflected Egypt's progress and capability to enter into the global age through erecting an urban façade for Cairo. Also, Egypt's modernization process was expedited due to the fact that during that same time the country was in a period of population growth and was flourishing economically as a result of an unprecedented cotton boom (AlSayyad, 2011).

The *mise en scène* of the modern city required relying on Ismail's entrusted henchman, Ali Mubarak, who was appointed minister of public works. Mubarak was assigned the daunting task of drawing and executing plans for new neighborhoods of the city. And within this limited time frame, he was responsible for the supervision of three major projects including the development of vacant plots of Azbakiyya Quarter, which was to become the new city center, and the drawing up and execution of a plan for the western area that lay between the old city and the Nile, Ismailia Quarter, a luxurious residential area where Tahrir Square lies, besides drafting a master plan for the whole city (Abu-Lughod, 1971). Pierre Grand and Cordier Bey were the French engineers and

planners who were responsible for executing the necessary infrastructure for the two quarters (Volait, 2003). Figure 4.1 shows Azbakiyya and Ismailia quarters. Ismailia quarter hosted large parcels of land (each plot was 2000 to 5000 square meters) that housed townhouses surrounded by private gardens. According to Volait (2003), Ismail granted parcels in these Ismailia Quarter at no cost under the condition that houses' completion take less than a year and a half and that they comply with the city's specifications in terms of height. But, she indicates that Ismail received few plot requests for Ismailia, probably due the time limitation given the large plot sizes. As a result, during Ismail's tenure, Ismailia Quarter was fully planned, but did not fully develop.

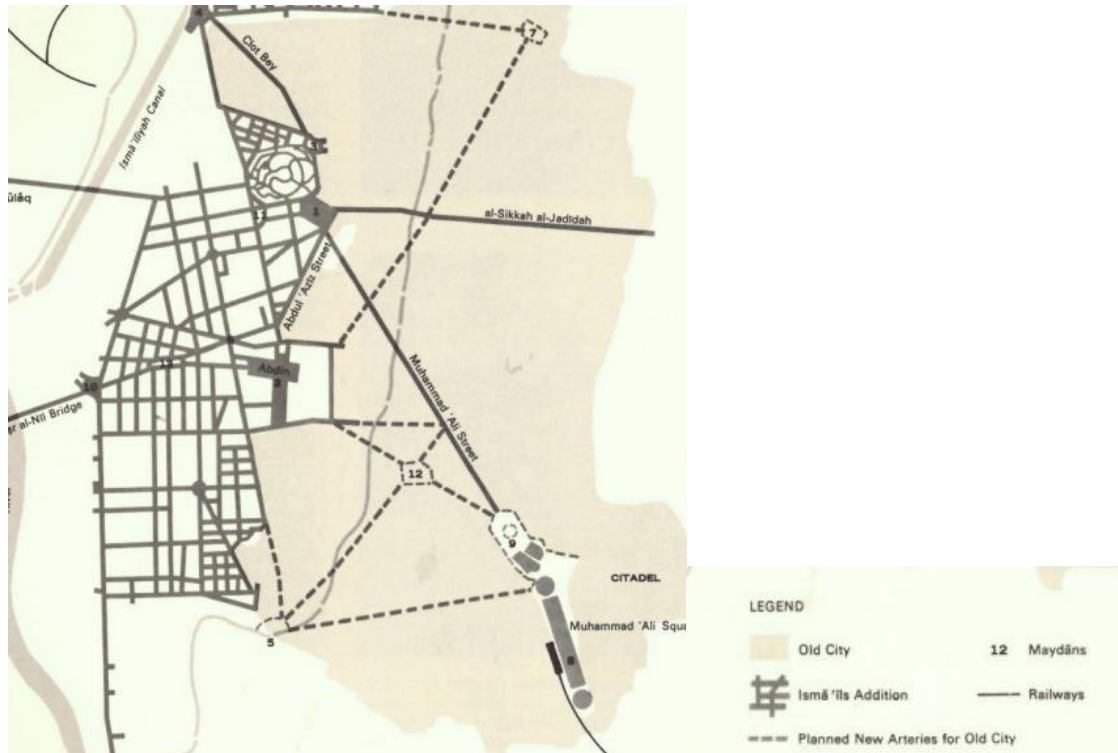


**Figure 4.1** A map of Azbakiyya and Ismailia quarters.

Source: Jean Luc Arnaud, 1874.

Unlike his counterpart, Baron Haussmann, Mubarak was cautious not to interfere with the existing old city fabric when laying out his plan. He might have also realized

that restructuring and digging deep in the existing built areas would entail demolitions that would have consumed more time and energy. With that being noted, some existing buildings demolitions were inevitable in order to enhance the street network and connectivity. The original plan was to construct five new streets that would puncture through the medieval city (Abu-Lughod, 1971). However, only two streets were built for the exclusive public to facilitate their crossing to the old city. Therefore, Ismail only focused on developing and replanning the western part of the city, creating a crack which was later transformed into a large gap between the old city of Cairo with its confusing labyrinths and modern Cairo with its wide gridded streets radiating from nodes and traffic circles as illustrated in Figure 4.2 (Ghannam, 2002). Abu-Lughod (1965) and some western travelers (Baedeker, 1898; Loti, 1908; Lamplough, 1909) perceived Cairo as two different cities after modernization where you have a European quarter juxtaposed with an indigenous medieval city creating a dual city that is similar to other cities discussed earlier in the Middle East. Moreover, Ismail's modern city urban plan was new and alien to the locals and introduced new open public spaces that were different compositionally and culturally from the existing public spaces of the medieval city including public squares and parks where dance and music performances took place.



**Figure 4.2** Ali Mubarak's Plan of Cairo, 1869.

Source: Abu-Lughod, 1971

With his lavish spending on creating a modern façade for Cairo for the occasion of the Suez Canal inauguration, Ismail bankrupted Egypt. He had borrowed over 90 million pounds from European banks and in 1875 sold his Suez Canal shares to the British Prime Minister to finance his modernization project (Abu-Lughod, 1971). After he failed to pay the debt, Egypt fell under the dual control of the British who supervised the revenues and French who audited and revised expenditures. Egypt fell under British occupation in 1882.

#### **4.1.3 Downtown Under the British Occupation**

The British were more concerned to implement strategies that would help reduce the Egyptian debt by focusing on agricultural resources as well as improving the

infrastructure and sanitary conditions (Volait & Baduel, 2005). In terms of urban development and construction, the British adopted a *laissez faire* attitude that allowed foreign and local land development companies to emerge and flourish. As noted by Volait (2003; Volait & Baduel, 2005) and Tignor (2011), the period of the British occupation between 1882 and 1920 witnessed a building boom. Accordingly, Ismailia Quarter developed and extended along the lines that Ismail and Ali Mubakar originally planned. It became an attractive site for English investors to build apartment buildings, offices, and department stores (Elshahed, 2007).

Furthermore, this construction growth resulted in the development of new neighborhoods that extended beyond the medieval and modern quarters and which included Garden City, Heliopolis, and Maadi. Public interventions were minimal and focused more on ameliorating the existing while private companies were responsible for urban extensions. From 1882 following World War I in 1917, Cairo's population doubled, reaching over 790,000 inhabitants (El Kadi, 2012). In 1922, Egypt got partial independence from the British, giving more power in the decision making to the local administration which prioritized urban developments. The local authorities focused on creating an entire town plan for Cairo with further modifications to some existing streets and a plan for the city's extension and future expansion to accommodate the population growth. There was also a search for a national Egyptian identity that local architects expressed through their designs (El Kadi, 2012). In 1936, an Egyptian architect by the name of Sayed Karim founded the first Egyptian architectural journal, *Al-Imara*. It was a platform that enabled architects to expose and display their projects and design proposals.

In 1936, Egypt and Britain signed a treaty that did not drastically affect the British involvement in Egypt, but was ensued with another rapid population surge (Raymond, 2000). By 1937, Cairo reached two million inhabitants-- becoming the largest metropolis in the Arab World and Africa (El Kadi, 2012). Demographically, by 1947 Ismailia Quarter had an ethnically diverse population with almost an equal percentage of local to foreign residents.

Ismailia did not only manifest a class diversity but also a cacophony of architectural styles that different local and European architects envisioned (Elshahed, 2007). Some apartment buildings that Italian and French architects designed during colonialism evoked a neo-classical style, while other administrative and governmental buildings, which emerged during the 1950s, blended the International Style with neo-Islamic or Ancient Egyptian motifs. Downtown then presented an eclectic experience that reflected a 20th-century Egyptian aesthetics.

From an examination of the evolution of modern Cairo in the nineteenth century and the continuation of its development during the British occupation until about mid twentieth century, it appears that, unlike what happened in Paris or the colonial cities in the Middle East and North Africa such as cities in Syria, Lebanon, or Algeria, this development was driven by local actors who were inspired by the French and British models of urban planning. In the first period between 1873 and 1882 Ismail, the ruler, was the main protagonist who decided that his “Country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a new system adapted to our social conditions.” (Tignor, 1968, p. 64). In the second period between 1882 and until around the early 1950s there was much less intervention



from the British in terms of urban planning that private investors and property developers were responsible for. Both periods, however, followed European, French and British, urban planning schemes. The duality that many researchers and travelers to the 19th and 20th century described was not only a result of Ismail's modernization that the British occupation embraced but can also be attributed to the ethnic, religious, and social diversity of Egypt's population at that time as El Kadi (2012) argues.

#### **4.2 Nationalist Cairo (1952- 2015)**

On the 23rd of July, 1952, a rogue group of Egyptian military officers, known as the free officers, took over the national radio station announcing a coup d'état over the monarchy, headed by King Farouk at that time (Pace, 1981). Farouk had no choice but to abandon his position as Egypt's king and let the Free Officers take control. The so-called 1952 Revolution served an even bigger purpose as it resulted in the ultimate termination of the British occupation in 1956 (Raymond, 2000). The transition from a monarchy to a republic coupled with the accelerated population growth had a profound impact on Cairo's urban development in the years following 1952. The first few years between 1952 and 1956 were transitional. The actual urban and social reform started during the presidency of the charismatic leader Gamal Abdel Nasser from 1956 to 1970 followed by a period of globalization that began with Sadat's tenure in 1970 and continued by Mubarak who ruled Egypt for 30 years from 1981 to 2011.

The function of Downtown Cairo as a residential area changed. This reform that started during the British colonization persisted in the 1950s as businesses, offices, commercial, and cultural activities increased at the city center. Downtown became the

epicenter of business, entertainment, and cultural events (Elshahed, 2007). In 1947, King Farouk initiated ambitious plans to turn Ismailia Square that once housed the British colonizers' barracks into an administrative and cultural center. His plans were partially realized but continued to develop following his ousting. And since downtown was highly symbolic of the British occupation, it underwent a significant morphological change that entailed the erasure of buildings and street names that were associated with the monarchy or colonialism (El Kadi, 2012). For instance, soon after Nasser assumed the presidency in 1956, he embarked on several projects to renovate Ismailia Square, which he renamed Tahrir Square, and to rejuvenate the eastern side of the Nile corniche. He commissioned the construction of the Arab Socialist Union and the Arab League buildings, on the same site where the British Barracks once stood, effacing all the traces of the British colonizers from the site (AlSayyad, 2011a).

#### **4.2.1 Downtown Cairo Under Nasser's Regime**

Nasser often referred to himself as a peasant who embraced socialist ideals that offered land, housing, and education to the peasants and the working class. This resulted in a social change in downtown that accompanied the functional reform. El Kadi (2012) notes that the process of Egypt's nationalization after 1952 resulted in the exodus of foreign residents from the country. This demographic change generated a social redistribution in Downtown Cairo in Ismailia quarter where military officers and members from the government's middle class replaced foreigners and a large number of the Egyptian aristocracy who moved to the periphery. This process of decentralization was exacerbated by Nasser's socialist rent control law that lowered and then in 1961 froze the rents of downtown buildings that became dilapidated. Those buildings were poorly maintained

and some were inevitably replaced by multiple story apartment buildings. Additionally, the seat of power moved from the core of the city to the suburb of Heliopolis located 12 kilometers away, which contributed to further deterioration of Ismailia Quarter. Accompanying decentralization were a series of urban plans extending to the city's peripheries. Al-Mohandesin and Nasr City were two neighborhoods the Nasser government constructed to accommodate the upper middle class and professional syndicates' members.

El Kadi (2012) and Elshahed (2007) argue that during Nasser's era downtown transformed from an aristocratic neighborhood to a lower class district where apartment building rooftops became squatter settlements. Cairo's downtown infrastructure had not been improved or maintained since 1907 with its sewage constantly overflowing in the streets (El Kadi, 2012). In his seminal novel "Yacoubian Building," Al-Aswany (2004) describes the social milieu of Cairo's Downtown in the 1970s by unpacking the stories of several protagonists living in the same building located Downtown. An Armenian businessman constructed the 10-story Art-Deco building in the 1930s. Al-Aswany illustrates the social decline of this area by narrating the story of an aristocrat whose status has deteriorated co-living in the building with a middle-class military officer and on the rooftop are lower income Egyptians who moved from rural areas and used part of the roof to raise chicken and pigeons. During that same time, there was a profusion of commercial goods. Downtown Cairo transformed from an exclusive elite district to an accessible area for trade activities manifested in department stores, small shops, and even street vendors selling affordable commodities to middle income and even some low income Egyptians (Abaza, 2006).

#### **4.2.2 Downtown Cairo Sadat's *Infitah* Policy**

This process of Downtown decadence perpetuated during Sadat and Mubarak's tenures. Sadat's *infitah* or open door policy in 1974 was a major catalyst for the urban decay of Downtown Cairo (Ryzova, 2015). His international vision was the polar opposite of Nasser's inward looking protocol. He endorsed a neoliberal agenda that enabled private and foreign investments and embraced capitalism. As a result, the prices of land and the cost of construction materials inflated. And with the rise of car ownership and the abundance of developments in Greater Cairo, there was a growing demand for middle class and luxury housing accompanied by high consumption (Ghannam, 2006). Consequently, the gap between Egyptian social classes widened, creating urban segregation. American cities' model, particularly Los Angeles, was Sadat's inspiration for Cairo's modernization. Thus, he endorsed decentralization that from 1975 to 1979 over 18 new towns were planned (AlSayyad, 2011a). The focus became the periphery while the core was not desirable anymore. Sadat's policies prioritized the tourists and the upper-class Egyptians' gaze. Downtown Cairo then became the field for foreign investments that replaced dismantled housing with luxury office buildings and hotels. Moreover, the government turned some plots to parking areas.

#### **4.2.3 Reviving Cairo of the *Belle Époque***

As a response to Downtown Cairo's urban decline from the 1960s to the 1980s, a number of private and public organizations launched initiatives to salvage Cairo of the *Belle Époque*, referring to modern khedival Cairo (El Kadi, 2015). The first wake-up call came following a devastating earthquake in 1992 that caused the fracture and collapse of many structures in Downtown. Between 1993 and 1998 the Ministry of Culture in collaboration

with the state authorities and a number of businessmen refurbished palaces and villas and repurposed them for cultural activities. They also pedestrianized some streets, creating opportunities for recreational activities. Additionally, private companies renovated 16 buildings of architectural and historical value, including the Stock Exchange, Misr Bank, and Groppi cafe buildings. In 2008, the National Organization for Urban Harmony (NOUH) along with the Cairo governorate painted the facades overlooking vital roads and squares, including Tahrir Square. However, this minor cosmetic fix only focused on the front side of the facades, while the sides maintained their faded colors. NOUH organized several design competitions aiming at reviving Khedival Cairo and repurposing public squares, but it did not realize many of the proposals. Al Ismaelia for Real Estate Investment is another private company that buys and then refurbishes and maintains buildings in Downtown. Egyptian entrepreneur Karim Shafei founded the company with a vision to bring back the social diversity that once prevailed in Khedival Cairo (Shafei, 2015). After the January 2011 Revolution, Downtown Cairo regained its glory and became of interest to many of the younger generations who were eager to learn more about its history and preserve its architecture and urbanism. In 2014, Cairo governorate launched an initiative entitled “the State of Downtown” to rejuvenate Downtown and reclaim its lost identity (Attia, 2015).

From a review of the over 150 years of Downtown Cairo, it is clear that this area went through several episodes of gentrification. The first was at the turn of the twentieth century, when apartment buildings replaced villas and palaces. The second and less profound wave was during the 1930s and 1940s when some Downtown dwellers moved to peripheral neighborhoods, including Heliopolis. The third and arguably most

detrimental wave of gentrification followed Nasser's 1952 coup that caused a large number of Downtown foreign and elite residents to leave the area. It was during the 1990s that a renewed interest in Downtown thrived aiming at reviving it as a cultural, social, economic, and touristic hub. Culturally, Downtown cafes and galleries serve as venues for intellectuals and artists where they exchanged innovative ideas and artistic and cultural movements.

Downtown Cairo has not only been the place for social, cultural, touristic, and commercial encounters, but it also was a stage for political expression. The first known protest was in 1882 by colonel Orabi, an Egyptian military officer, against Khedive Tawfik, which eventually resulted in the British colonization of Egypt. Another major revolt is the one Saad Zaghloul, the head of the Wafd political party, led in 1919 against the British occupation. Egyptians marched from Zaghloul residence, in Downtown, heading to the Royal Palace of Abdin. Years later in 1946, Egyptians clashed with British Military forces on the site of the military barracks in Tahrir Square, which resulted later in the British evacuation of the barracks in 1947 (Owen, 1997). Egyptians endorsed the national leadership and celebrated the 1952 independence from the monarchy by occupying spaces to express their ideas. They also expressed their grievances following the loss of the 1967 Arab- Israeli war, while they celebrated their October 1973 victory over Israel (Fahmy, 2011). In 1977, people denounced Sadat's increase of basic goods, such as bread in what was called "the bread riots" (Salama, 2013). Later in 2003, they expressed their rage against the American invasion of Iraq. And finally, no one can dismiss when Downtown became the epicenter of the 2011 Revolution that ousted Mubarak and was followed by another demonstration in 2013, toppling Morsi. These are

some incidents when downtown Cairo was used as a political platform for people's expression.

### **4.3 The New Administrative Capital (2015- 2021)**

In March 2015, Sisi's government unveiled plans to build a new administrative capital for Egypt to be located 45 kilometers east of Cairo's Downtown. The project's website showcases 3D renderings of high rise post-modern glass covered towers emulating Dubai's structures. The New Administrative Capital digital renders feature lakes and ample greenery, which raises concerns about feasibility and infrastructure given the scarcity of water resources in Egypt. Ursula Lindsey (2017) describes this new capital as an "anti-Cairo" that turns its back to the historic city center where all the services and infrastructure is concentrated. But the Egyptian government claims that this capital will be equipped to accommodate five million inhabitants, relieving some congestion in the historic center (Fahmy, 2015). The government also plans to relocate all the administrative and governmental functions to this new capital. The parliament, the presidency headquarters, and the ministries will be housed there. The idea is to construct a new Downtown, upgrading from a Haussmannization in Cairo's historic Downtown to a Dubaization at the New Capital's Downtown (Lindsey, 2017).

The idea of erecting a new capital is not unprecedented to modern Egypt. In fact, in the late 1950s and the 1970s Nasser and Sadat founded cities that were supposed to function as new capital cities: Nasr City, and Sadat City respectively. Nasr City is located outside the boundaries of the historic core, has a governmental center, housing, and recreational facilities. Sadat City is located about a 100-kilometers northwest of Cairo

and was supposed to house similar functions as Nasr City, but had not been as successful since the Sadat's government originally planned it to accommodate 500,000 residents, but it only ended up with about 150,000 inhabitants (Khorshed et. al., 2018). In the case of the new capital, the question is whether Sisi's proposed decentralization will, in the future, replace the historic center of Downtown Cairo with a new Dubai-style city core.




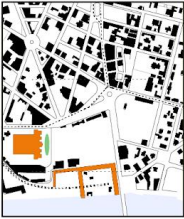








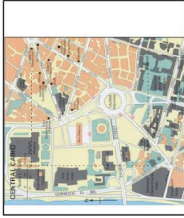



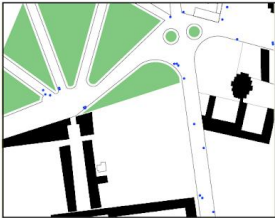
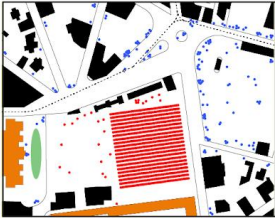



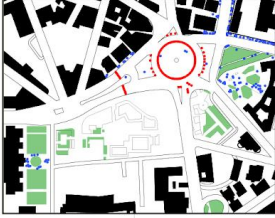
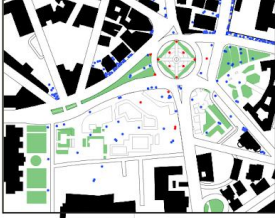








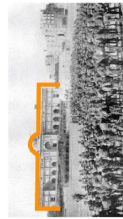





## **CHAPTER 5**

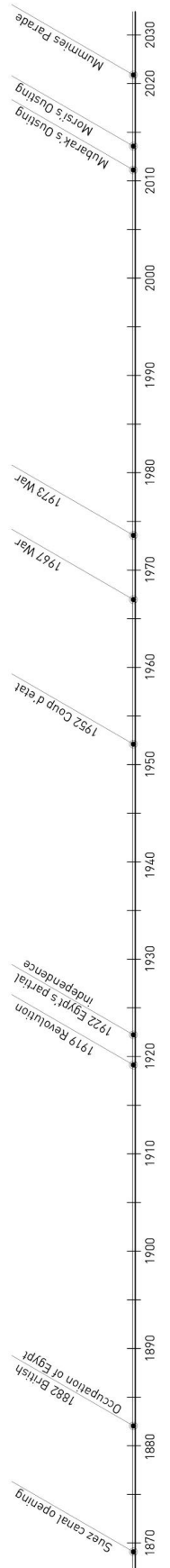
### **TAHRIR SQUARE (1872- 2021)**

This chapter examines the evolution and development of Tahrir Square's design and use since its foundation as a roundabout in modern Cairo from around 1869 until early 2021. This research shows how its various physical changes, reflected on its re-designs, echo Egypt's political, social, and cultural statuses at different pivotal moments in its history.

The chapter covers seven time periods: (1867- 1869), (1882- 1952), (1952- 1970), (1970- 2011), (2011- 2013), (2013- 2019), and lastly (2019- 2021). Each of the seven-time periods marks a moment of transition in the history of Egypt. While some of these moments were brief such as times of liberation and freedom of political expression, others were long-lasting including British occupation of the square. Over the years, the square acquired three names. The original name of the square when it was founded around 1869 was Qasr el-Nil. In 1919 it acquired the name Ismailia Square, and finally, it earned its most recent name Tahrir, following the 1952 Revolution. The visual timeline presented at the beginning of this chapter visually encapsulates the history of change in design and use of Tahrir Square from 1869 to 2021 covering the seven time periods.

# Tahrir Square Timeline

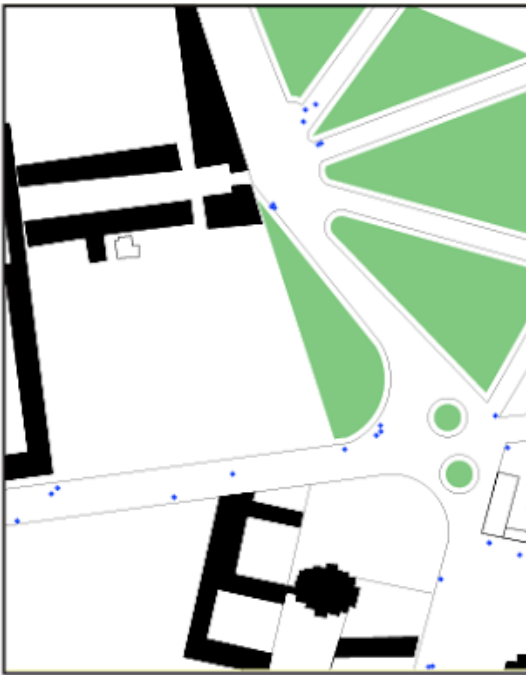
Founded 1867-1869	Colonized 1882-1952	Nationalized 1952-1970	Globalized 1970-2011	Occupied 2011-2013	Surveilled 2013-2019	Exhibited 2019-2021
						
						
						
						
						



### 5.1 Founded (1867- 1869): a *rond point* in Modern Cairo



Between 1867 and 1869, Egypt's Viceroy, Ismail, founded Ismailia Square as a *rond-point* in Ismailia Quarter that he laid out *à la française*



Source: gallica.bnf.fr (Retrieved on February 27, 2021)

From 1882 to 1952 Ismailia Square acquired political, cultural and educational meaning with the British occupation of the barracks, the construction of the Egyptian Museum and the opening of the American University in Cairo. The square became a stage for public encounters between British officers and local and foreign elites.

Before the creation of modern Cairo during the second half of the 19th century, Tahrir Square did not exist. In ancient Egypt, it was just a patch of desert that the River Nile flooded during the Fatimid era in the tenth century that it into a marshland, which was left undeveloped from the foundation of Cairo in 969 until the turn of the 19th century. During the Bahri Mamluk Islamic Dynasty (1250- 1382) a prince by the name of Qoson owned the land and used it as a farm for animals and agriculture (Al-Hadidi, 2017).

By the end of the eighteenth century, the land had dried up and was used as a military camp by the French troops who invaded Egypt in 1798. A few years later, Mohamed Ali, the founder of modern Egypt, built barrage dams to control the Nile from flooding. What w later became Tahrir Square was then a dry 500-acre parcel of land consisting of gardens and cultivated fields (AlSayyad, 2011a). Ali built a palace for his daughter, Nazli, on the western side of the square overlooking the Nile, which was called Qasr el-Nil. Mohamed Said Pasha, who ruled Egypt from 1854 to 1852, purchased the palace in 1853, demolished it and built massive barracks as the headquarters for the Egyptian-Ottoman army where military training and parades took place (Al-Hadidi, 2017). During that time, Egypt was a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. The other structures on the square were a few palaces that belonged to the ruling family (Owen, 1997). Before the mid 19th century, Princess Nazli's Palace was the dominant

structure in what was called the Qasr el-Nil area. The other prevailing features were the vast, partially swamped, vacant lands and a few private palatial gardens.

It was not until 1867 that preliminary planning of the layout for what was known as Qasr el-Nil Square began during the planning and construction of modern Cairo, which took place between 1867 and 1869. At that time, Khedive Ismail was preparing to transform the Egyptian capital into a European backdrop for the Suez Canal opening. Qasr el-Nil Square was part of Ismail's modernization project. The square was situated in the modern Quarter of Ismailia, a name that paid homage to its founder and was laid out following a *haussmannian* plan with wide, tree-lined boulevards and axial streets radiating from several traffic circles (Abu-Lughod, 1971). The square was better defined when the Qasr el-Nil Bridge was built in 1872 to connect and facilitate the traffic between the downtown area, where Ismailia is located, and Al-Gezira, which is linked to the Giza Great Pyramids. On an 1874 Cairo map the square looked like two traffic circles, named Qasr el-Nil *rond points*, surrounded on the east and west by European-Islamic style residential palaces belonging to the khedival family, and foreign and local high-ranking officials (Figure 5.1) (Owen, 1997). (Scholars who have looked at the origins of Tahrir Square have not closely examined what appears on the 1874 map to be these two traffic circles). The square included a small mosque on the southern side where the mausoleum of a 12th-century sheikh by the name of Al-Abit stood. In 1868, Khedive Ismail built the Al-Abit Mosque within the walls of his palace (El Dorghamy, 2011).

Not only did the Qasr el-Nil area play a military role because of the barracks in the western area of the square, it also acquired an additional role as a passage for tourists who visited the Pyramids. The military barracks stood on the west side along the main



avenue that connects the *rond points* to the Qasr el-Nil Bridge. On the northern side of the square there were cultivated gardens lands and on the east and south stood khedival and elite palaces with their private gardens. The site was still very much undeveloped. Transportation was with carriages with the main hub located at el-Ataba Square, about 1.5 kilometers away.

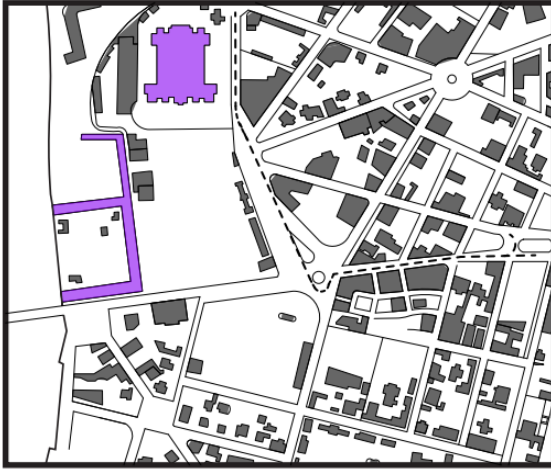
As noted in the previous chapter, the parcels in Ismailia Quarter were large. And although the Khedive provided concessions to investors that granted them land in Ismailia at no cost, Ismail's condition that required those investors to construct a building within a year and a half represented a pressure on them. As a result the vicinity of Ismailia Square remained barely populated during the time of Ismail (1863- 1879).



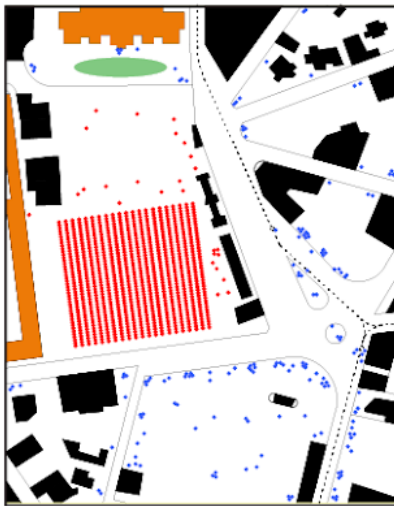
**Figure 5.1** Map of Modern Cairo in 1874 showing Ismailia Square with two roundabouts to regulate traffic going from and to Kasr el-Nil Bridge. The barracks are the E-shaped buildings on the western side of the square overlooking the Nile.

Source: Gallica.bnf.fr (Retrieved on February 27, 2021)

## 5.2 Colonized (1882- 1952): military barracks during British occupation



From 1882 to 1952 Ismailia Square acquired political, cultural and educational meaning with the British occupation of the barracks, the construction of the Egyptian Museum and the opening of the American University in Cairo. The square became a stage for public encounters between British officers and local and foreign elites.



Source: Ahram Online and Rawi Magazine (Retrieved on February 27, 2021)

With his lavish spending to create a modern façade for Cairo on the occasion of the Suez Canal inauguration, Ismail bankrupted Egypt. He had borrowed over 90 million pounds from European banks and in 1875 sold his Suez Canal shares to the British Prime Minister to finance his modernization projects (Abu-Lughod, 1971). After Ismail failed to pay the debt, his son Tawfik replaced him in 1879 and a few years later, in 1882, Egypt fell under British occupation

When the British occupied Cairo, they used the existing Qasr el-Nil barracks as a base for their army from 1882 until 1947 (Al-Hadidi, 2017). What was then called Qasr el-Nil Square became the site for British military training and daily parades, which took place in the open area behind the barracks' E-shaped structure (Owen, 1997). In addition, a nearby building hosted some British agencies. In these ways the square became a manifestation of British colonialism in Egypt. If someone were to visit Qasr el-Nil Square at the end of the 19th century, they would have experienced a divided site between the British forces on the west side and the elite's palaces on the east and south sides. Qasr el-Nil Square served the colonizers and provided them with a large space for their activities while also still offering spacious, private, fenced in palaces with gardens for mostly foreign aristocrats. Despite this functional separation, the juxtaposition of the military colonial with elite residential functions echoed Egypt's political and social circumstances at that time.

The stabilization of the Nile Bank due to the construction of the Aswan Dam around 1902, that controlled the Nile from flooding, encouraged further development of the square (Owen, 1997). In the early 1900s, three tram lines entered the square connecting it with other important nodes, such as the transportation hub in el-Ataba

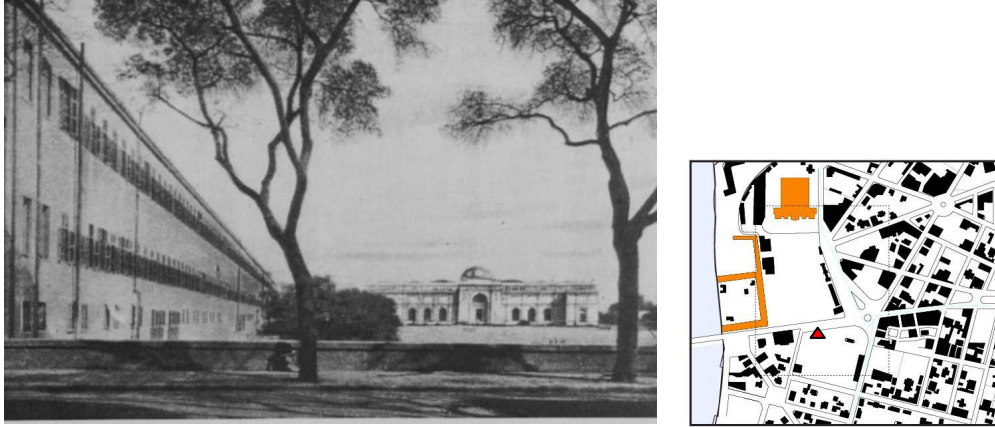


Square to the northeast and the road leading to the Pyramids to the west. Al-Hadidi (2017) indicates that the British built a Christian church for the soldiers called Garrison Church on the western end of the barracks. The church appears on 1908, 1914, and 1920 maps of the square (see Figures 5.3 and 5.5). In addition, two sets of developments at the turn of the 20th century gave a more rectangular definition to Qasr el-Nil Square. The first one was the erection of a series of apartment buildings along the eastern side of the square, opposite the barracks, during the early 1900s. European and Levantine investors and merchants purchased the palaces that existed on the square, demolished and divided up the large plots, and built Art-Deco buildings (Elshahed, 2007; Rabbat, 2011). Four to six-story apartment blocks replaced the vast palatial gardens that once existed.

In 1902, the square received Egypt's most vital cultural institution, which is the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, commonly known as the Egyptian Museum (AlSayyad, 2011a). It was the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette who envisioned the construction of a monumental building to house the ancient Egyptian artifacts and antiquities that used to be located in the Bulaq Museum and then temporarily in the Khedival palace at Giza (Al-Hadidi, 2017; Rabbat, 2011). In 1895, French architect Marcel Dourgnon won the museum design competition, which was composed of a European panel of jurors, but due to a series of delays, it was not until 1902 that the building was completed (Dawood, 2010). The museum was the first and largest in the world to exclusively house ancient Egyptian antiquities. It is a monumental two-story building that follows a T-shape layout with a frontal facade emulating a basilican plan since the entrance is protruding and topped with a dome. This double-height dome also acts as a distribution point to the 100 galleries on the right and left (Elshahed, 2020). The design followed the Beaux-Arts

tradition that evoked the neoclassical style, which also combines some Greco-Roman and Italian Renaissance elements represented in the arches and columns (Rabbat, 2011). Ancient Egyptian references were very minimal on the exterior facade of the museum and even the inscriptions were in Latin, a language that most Egyptians do not understand (Owen, 1997). The Italian company Zaffrani that was responsible for construction used, for the first time in Egypt, reinforced concrete and innovative Italian construction methods that bolstered the durability of the building (*Egyptian Museum in Cairo*, 2021).

The museum was a clear reflection of European Egyptologists' interpretation and representation of ancient Egypt. They imposed their ideas of where, how, and to whom Egyptian artifacts should be exhibited. With the opening of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, Tahrir Square or Qasr el-Nil Square acquired a new cultural and touristic significance. An early twentieth-century picture depicts the Egyptian Museum in the background with the long monotonous facade of the British barracks in the foreground giving its back to the square and the museum (Figure 5.2). At the back of the barracks, there was a training area with a very low fence, which indicates that Egyptians and tourists could observe the British colonizers parading, playing, or training, but they were probably not welcome inside this vast plot.



**Figure 5.2** An early 20th century picture showing the Egyptian Museum in the background and the back wall of the British Barracks to the west.

Source: Owen, 1997

The conception, design, location, and administration of the Egyptian Museum all by the French is a manifestation of the tension and rivalry between the imperial powers of France and Britain, marking their presence and showcasing their authority over a vital Middle Eastern capital. While Britain was exerting military control, France was expressing cultural domination and a desire to appropriate the ancient Egyptian heritage. Egyptians had a peripheral role in the decision-making regarding their own antiquities and were not part of the museum design or implementation processes. It was obvious that the museum catered to the foreign and Egyptian local elites and to tourists with a growing interest in Ancient Egyptian artifacts. Although Auguste Mariette, the founder of the museum, primarily dedicated the museum to Europeans, he also hoped to educate Egyptians, whom he treated authoritatively, and whom he felt were not as impressed by their Pharaonic heritage as they should be (Dawood, 2010). By the turn of the 20th century, when Egypt became physically colonized by the British and culturally and intellectually colonized by the French, Qasr el-Nil Square became a physical manifestation of this dual colonization through the juxtaposition of the British barracks

and the Beaux Art style Egyptian Museum (Figure 5.2). Building the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities was a demonstration of the colonial order that Mitchell (1991) alludes to in his book “*Colonising Egypt*,” that Britain, and more particularly France, were imposing on Egypt. This order entailed the institutionalization of the country by building museums, schools, administrative offices, embassies, and prisons.

The museum, facing the square and on its north side, along with the extended back wall of barracks on the west side, and the series of Art-Deco apartment buildings on the eastern side gave it more definition to Qasr el-Nil Square than it previously had. By 1908 it became known as Ismailia Square (Figure 5.3). Those apartment buildings came to be known later as Mariette Pasha Buildings to commemorate Auguste Mariette, the founder of the Egyptian Museum. The square was probably renamed Ismailia as it started to take shape with a legible morphology, which was accentuated by the addition of a linear square, in front of the Mariette Buildings, by the name of Mariette Pasha that also regulated the traffic (Figure 5.3).



visited the square towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century reported that Europeans occupied the Ismailia Quarter, which had bland or “architecturally uninteresting houses,” but also had some articulated structures, including palaces, ministries, and the British Consulate (Baedeker, 1898; Breasted, 1908; Kelly, 1910; Murray, 1888). When they described Ismailia Square, they always mentioned the British barracks having a dominant, long structure. By the turn of the twentieth century, and especially after the construction of the tram lines 1896 and 1900, Ismailia Square started to become a traffic distribution hub (Owen, 1997; Murray, 1888).

The tension was rising between Egyptians and British colonizers with several clashes occurring between Egyptian civilians and British soldiers in front of the barracks on Ismailia Square during the first half of the 20th century. Fahmy (2011) argues that Tahrir Square became the epicentre of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution because it had been associated with political discontent since the British made the existing military barracks as their army headquarters in 1882. Then in 1919, the square witnessed its first revolution and acquired even greater political significance as it became an important platform for Egyptians to express their opposition to the British occupation (Rabbat, 2011). In 1919, Saad Zaghloul, the national political leader who was also known as the father of Egyptians, led Egyptian crowds and marched through Ismailia Square to protest against the British. However, according to AlSayyad (personal communication, June 2020), the main stage for the 1919 Revolution was Abdeen Square where the centre of administration used to be located, and Ismailia Square played a peripheral role then.

During the first half of the 20th century, Ismailia Square was not only a British and French colonial, cultural, and touristic center. In 1919 it also hosted a building that

represents the infiltration of American culture: The American University in Cairo (AUC). The university occupies a neo-Mamluk building that overlooks the south-eastern side of Ismailia Square. The structure used to be the palace of Ahmed Khairy Pasha, Ismail's minister in 1874 (Rabbat, 2011). By the end of the 19th century, a Greek bought it, lived in one part and turned the other part into a cigarette factory. From 1908 to 1918, the building had many uses: the first floor housed the Egyptian University, while the second floor had the Khedival Association for political economy, statistics, and legislation, and the third floor had the Egyptian Women Union (Al-Hadidi, 2017). Since 1919, the American University in Cairo (AUC) has owned the building, which became later known as the AUC Main Building. A few decades after the opening of AUC, the university acquired several other buildings in the vicinity. The cultural imperialism reflected by introducing to Egypt an American higher education system that replaced what had been the Egyptian University represented America's desire to occupy a vital location where the other two imperial authorities were already represented.

The main AUC building, overlooking Ismailia Square, had the name of the American University in Cairo engraved in English and Arabic. Wadei Phillistin, who attended AUC from 1938 to 1942, recalled memories of the main building by describing that it was accessible from Tahrir Square (later the entrance was relocated to a side street) where the main AUC gate was open to the public with no restrictions on access. Along with other students, Phillistin used to take the tram or a public bus from where he lived, passing through Ismailia Square to get to AUC. He also indicates that the small AUC student body was very diverse since the school had Egyptian, Levantine, Jewish, Greek, and Armenian male and female students. He also mentioned that middle-class Egyptians

studied alongside their foreign aristocratic counterparts. The existence of the AUC as a diverse educational institution in proximity to the British military Barracks and the Egyptian Museum drastically changed the demography of Ismailia Square. It became a venue of interesting encounters between British military officers, mostly foreign tourists, and a diverse student body that passed daily through the square. AUC not only introduced diversity to Ismailia Square, it also offered a different approach to teaching and learning in Egypt. When he joined AUC in 1938, Phillistin reminisced about his philosophy of religion professor Dr. Watson, who was also the university president at that time, telling students that “ Here at AUC, we don’t educate you, we simply give you keys and with these keys you can open whatever you want” (min 6:30. The AUC introduced a non-traditional way of critical thinking to the Egyptian middle-class students which also extended to the general public through the public lectures organized by a division called “extension”. Philistin also reports that AUC students took various courses covering many disciplines, including psychology, Arabic literature, drama, philosophy, and economics. This type of American educational infiltration had, arguably, a much more powerful impact than the authoritative, parental style, control that the British and French imposed on Egypt.

In 2006, the Supreme Council of Antiquities registered the iconic AUC main building as a historical structure that should be preserved (Al-Hadidi, 2017). In 2008, the expanding university moved to its new campus in the 5th Settlement, on Cairo’s periphery. What had been the campus is now the University’s School of Continuing Education where cultural events also take place.



By 1920 Ismailia Square had become more morphologically legible, but also got a more eclectic identity as it was bounded on the east by the British Barracks that overlooked the open space where training used to occur every day next to the Egyptian Museum to the north and a series of apartment buildings on the east. The only religious icon on the square is the small mosque of Al-Abit (indicated with a crescent on Figure 5.5), which was included in Sarai al-Ismailia that the British commissioner acquired as his residence after 1882. Another map of the square in 1914 shows the mosque as an independent structure from the palace, demonstrating the presence of a public religious symbol on a modern Cairene square, which was anomalous in this modernized area that did not originally include any public mosques. Most of the mosques existed in the medieval city of “thousands of minarets” city (Rabbat, 2011). An aerial view of Ismailia Square in 1938 captures the vast, open, undeveloped trapezoidal site with the dominating E-shaped British barracks giving their back to the Egyptian Museum (Figure 5.6).



**Figure 5.5** A map of Ismailia Square in 1920.

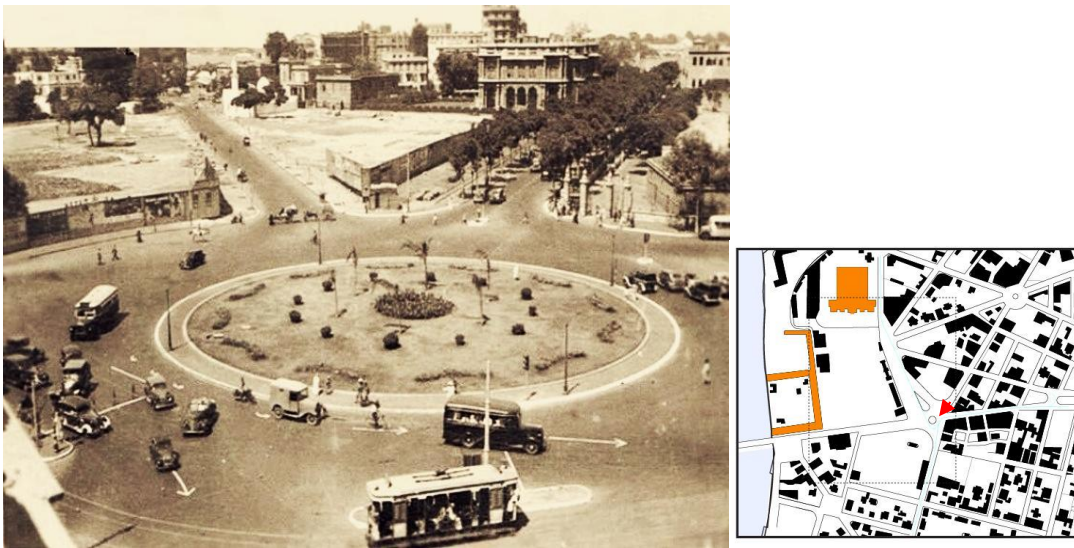
Source: Library of Congress (Retrieved on March 1, 2021)



**Figure 5.6** An aerial view of Ismailia Square in 1938 showing the E-shaped barracks and the Egyptian Museum left of the picture.

Source: UWM Library Digital Collection (Retrieved on March 1, 2021)

Vehicular circulation is another important aspect that has continued to be a defining feature of Ismailia Square since the turn of the 20th century. During the colonial period, Cairo's vehicular traffic increased as automobiles entered the Cairene streets in 1903 (Abu-Lughod, 1971). Having branching, paved, wide streets, Ismailia Square had a significant share of private cars, buses, and taxis in addition the tram lines, turning the square into a major traffic hub in the 1930s (Figure 5.7).



**Figure 5.7** A view looking southwest at Ismailia Square in the 1940s. The arcaded building at the back of the image is a palace that later became the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Source: Al-Ahram Online (Retrieved on March 1, 2021)

Ismailia quare continued to be colonized by the British barracks until the end of World War II. In 1947, British troops evacuated the barracks and Farouk, Egypt's king at that time, ordered their demolition and planned to repurpose the square as a civic center. Appearing in his military uniform, Farouk was attempting to affirm his sovereignty by raising the Egyptian flag on the barracks in a public celebration of the evacuation of the British army in 1947 (Figure 5.8). Furthermore, as part of his antebellum urban projects,

he commissioned a statue of his grandfather, Khedive Ismail, to be installed in the main roundabout of Ismailia Square, which he also enlarged and planted with grass (Al-Hadidi, 2017).



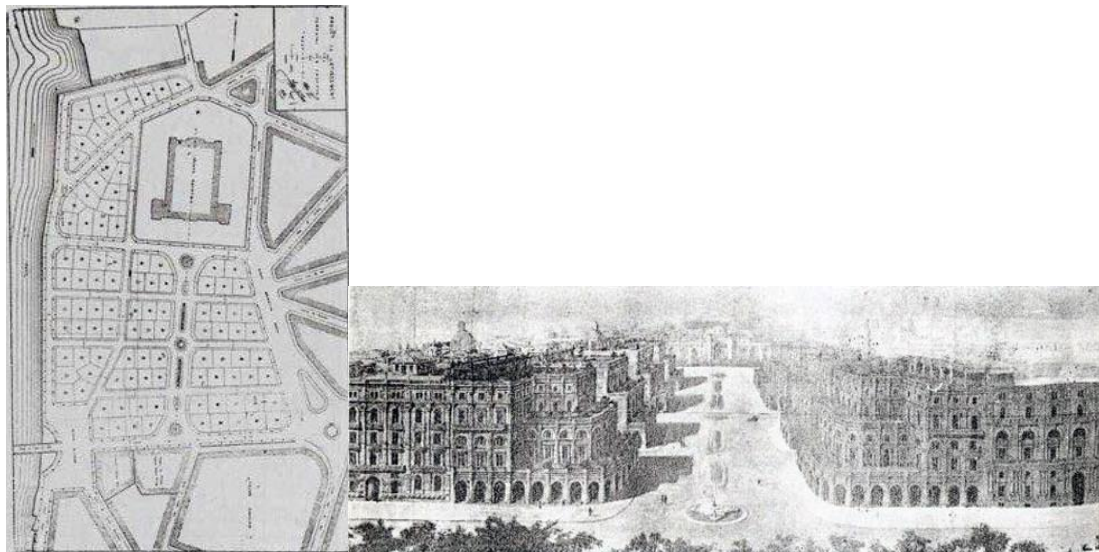
**Figure 5.8** King Farouk after raising the Egyptian flag on the evacuated British Barracks, 1947.

Source: Library of Alexandria digital collection (Retrieved on March 1, 2021)

The razing of the huge barracks that had occupied a vital central location in Cairo overlooking the Nile sparked an interest among architects and investors to propose design schemes for Ismailia Square. The first one had been proposed in 1912 by Moussa Qattawi, a businessman who also invested in Cairo's infrastructure and real estate (Elshahed, 2015). His proposal was published 45 years later in the Egyptian architectural magazine of *Al-Imara*. Qattawi's 1912 plan entailed demolishing the British barracks since, according to him, it was inappropriate for a repository of ancient Egyptian civilization, which is the Museum for Egyptian Antiquities to be flanked by a physical reminder of foreign occupation (Elshahed, 2011b). Qattawi's proposal consisted of dense



residential blocks flanking the main avenue that led to the Egyptian Museum. In his plan along what he called Khedive Ismail Street would be a series of round plazas with ancient statues leading the way to the museum (Figure 5.9). The plan focused only on highlighting the museum and creating a suitable context for it by extending the urban fabric of modern Cairo to the square and by introducing large residential blocks with wide avenues and roundabouts. It gave no consideration to creating open public spaces since they already existed in other locations in Cairo, such as the parks on the adjacent Zamalek Island. This was reflective of Qattawi's background as a businessman and real estate investor who intended to make the maximum profit out of the site. The perspective sketch of Qattawi's proposals evokes memories of 19th-century Parisian avenues flanked by arcaded buildings that lead to an iconic structure in the vista (in this case it is the Egyptian Museum). Qattawi's plan was never realized.



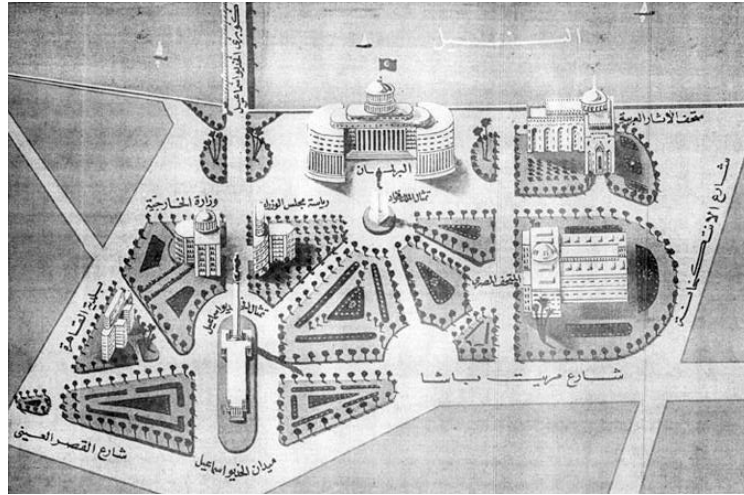
**Figure 5.9** Moussa Qattawi's proposal for Ismailia Square re-design in 1912.

Source: ElShahed, 2011

In 1947 after the departure of British troops from the barracks, Muhammad Dul-Fakkar Pasha, motivated by the spirit of nationalism that prevailed during that time, published an ambitious, utopian plan to re-design the area surrounding Tahrir Square. The proposal called for a political and cultural center for the city. This was to be created by building a number of administrative buildings housing ministries and museums with commemorative statues enclosed by a series of gardens on the square (Figure 5.10). It also included a new parliament building inspired by the United States Capitol Building that was to be located on the site of the barracks. In his descriptive text in the general interest Egyptian magazine called *Al-Musawar*, Dul-Fakkar stated that “the capital’s official, political, and cultural life will be united” together in the new center “to give tourists and visitors a clear view of Egypt with its ancient heritage, and its modern city” (Elshahed, 2011). His proposal was to create a civic, political, and cultural center that displayed the Pharaonic past within a modern Cairene context. Dul-Fakkar’s proposal was more representational and illustrative and less architectural, unlike Qattawi’s proposal that included accurate architectural drawings in an architectural magazine. Dul-Fakkar’s design was more accessible and legible to the general public.

His plan was only partially realized in 1951 with the creation of some open spaces on the former site of the barracks and the construction of Mogama, the municipality building south of the square in lieu of the residence of the British Commissioner (Al-Hadidi, 2017; Owen, 1997). The purpose of Mogama was to concentrate most of the country’s bureaucratic functions in one place. It is a 14-storey colossal building designed by an Egyptian architect, Dr. Kamal Ismail, who adopted a simplified form of the Islamic style, especially on the ground floor and the entrance of the building. The building forms

an enclosure on the south side of the square since the architect arced it to the center of the existing roundabout that contained the pedestal of the statue of Ismail (Figure 5.11).



**Figure 5.10** Muhammad Dul-Fakkar’s proposal for Ismailia Square re-design in 1947 showing the parliament building with two curved arms on the site of the barracks along with ministries and the municipality on the left of the 3D representation.

Source: ElShahed, 2011



**Figure 5.11** A view looking south of Tahrir Square roundabout with the pedestal and Mogama in the background in the 1960s. These two bureaucratic and monarchical symbols were King Farouk’s last additions to Ismailia Square, while the Mogama is usually associated with the republic.

Source: *Hippostcards*. (Retrieved on March 7, 2021)

### 5.3 Nationalized (1952-1970): a symbol for the Arab Republic



In 1952 Egypt became a republic following a coup d'état by Egyptian military officers. During the tenure of Nasser, Tahrir Square witnessed what is arguably its most significant morphological and urban change.



Source: hipostcard and UWM digital collection (Retrieved on March, 2021)



King Farouk partially reached his goal of decolonizing Ismailia Square and demonstrating his loyalty and spirit of nationalism to the Egyptian people by deconstructing the British barracks; But he did not get the chance to inaugurate the Mogama administrative governmental building because, on July 23rd 1952, Egyptian soldiers initiated a *coup d'état* that toppled Farouk. That day marks a turning point in the history of Egypt that directly affected Ismailia Square: its role as a platform of political expression and as Cairo's civic center has been accentuated. The Egyptian crowds overflowed it to voice their nationalist ideas after toppling both the monarchy and evicting the last bit of the British colonizers following 1952 (Fahmy, 2011). The Square was finally liberated from the colonial monarchy that lasted for several decades as it became the site for showcasing the modern buildings of the Egyptian Republic. In October 1952, the first president of Egypt, Mohamed Naguib, launched a military parade in Ismailia Square commemorating the three month anniversary of the July 1952 revolution as shown in Figure 5.12 (Ziada, 2015). After a brief period of being called Al-Horreya Square (meaning freedom) from 1952 to 1954, the official name became Tahrir, which means liberation (Rabbat, 2011).



**Figure 5.12** October 1952 Egyptian military parade in Tahrir Square celebrating the Egyptian Republic with tanks, hoisted Egyptian flags, and Egyptian soldiers in their military uniforms.

Source: Library of Alexandria digital collection (Retrieved on March 11, 2021)

In 1953, the new national government entirely erased the colonizers' physical traces on Tahrir Square when it continued demolishing the barracks (Al-Hadidi, 2017). Another act that symbolized the falling of the monarchy was the empty pedestal in the middle of the roundabout that was intended to host Ismail's statue but was never placed there. The statue-less pedestal remained until 1987 when the government had to take it down for the metro line construction (El Dorghamy, 2011). With the barracks' demolition, the empty pedestal, and Egyptian military and civilians using the square to express their opinions, Tahrir Square reflected an accurate image of a liberated Egypt that entered an era of nationalism, which the square also echoed through its re-design, use, and surrounding buildings from 1954 to 1960.

On January 23, 1953, Tahrir Square witnessed an event that was a clear indication of the new direction and policies the national Egyptian government pursued during the over 50 years that followed. A celebratory parade took place on Tahrir Square on the six month anniversary of the 1952 Revolution. Photographs from that day show a grand

parade with commercial vehicles branding food, beverage, and cosmetic products among other national and international brands, such as Pepsi-Cola, and the National Plastic Company as depicted in Figure 5.13. In the background appears the barracks before their demolition later in 1953 (Figure 5.14) and the Mogama, which later became associated with the nationalist era. It became apparent that the new government was preparing Egypt to embrace capitalism and to open up to the rest of the world and be part of the global exchange of commodities without losing control over the Egyptian population. And what could better express this preparation than architecture as projected on Tahrir Square?



**Figure 5.13** January 1953 parade photographs showing Pepsi-Cola and the National Plastics companies' floats.

Source: Library of Alexandria digital collection (Retrieved on March 11, 2021)



**Figure 5.14** Aerial view of Tahrir Square during the 6 months anniversary parade in January 1953.

Source: Library of Alexandria digital collection (Retrieved on March 11, 2021)

The most visually compelling structure is Mogama. It opened its doors after the 1952 Revolution, which since then became the exemplar of the relentless and draining Egyptian bureaucracy. That is, it was the repository of most of the country's paperwork from birth certificates, to passports and travel permits, to death certificates. So most Egyptians and visitors entered it (AlSayyad, 2011a). Mogama is a clear manifestation of the authoritative power of the government exerting control over its citizens who need to obtain a permit in order to travel. Later, the structure came to symbolize the inefficient governmental system of the Egyptian Republic as captured in the 1992 Egyptian Movie "*Terrorism and Kabab*" during which the protagonist spends several days trying to obtain some official paperwork from the Mogama (Arafa, 1992).

After the 1952 coup, Tahrir Square became a tabula rasa for local architects and planners to project a modern image of the revolutionary Egyptian Republic. In 1953, *al-musawar* magazine published another schematic plan for Tahrir Square proposed by the Cairo Municipality (Elshahed, 2015). The ambitious proposal called for surrounding the existing structures, such as the Mogama and Al-Abit Mosque, with a national radio and broadcast building and a national library, while also adding a monument at the center of the roundabout commemorating the unknown soldier (Figure 5.15). Originally, foreign countries had built cenotaphs for the unknown soldier all over Egypt for the soldiers they lost following World Wars I and II. After 1952, Egyptian artists adapted and nationalized this type of monument to commemorate the Egyptian soldiers. It was also their way to gain visibility and impress the new regime. The government did not realize any of the proposals.

In the same year, Architect Sayed Karim published a proposal for Tahrir Square both in his architectural journal, *al-Imara*, and in *al-musawar* (Elshahed, 2015). He proposed replacing the Egyptian Museum with an Egyptian museum for civilization, and building a hotel, with a casino extending to the Nile, on the site of the barracks. His plan also included a new building for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a structure for the radio and television administration, and an enormous monument for the unknown soldier by artist Fathi Mahmoud to be located in the roundabout (Figures 5.16 and 5.17). Publishing several proposals for Tahrir Square design in such a widely read Egyptian magazine like *al-musawar* signifies the desire of architects and planners to reach and appeal to Egyptians and also to the government. But it looked like his proposal did not appeal to the regime, and therefore, it never materialized.





(currently the site west of Mogama) that the government had demolished in 1954 (Al-Hadidi, 2017). In 1956 a new elaborate mosque replaced Al-Abit, that is Omar Makram Mosque. The *Awqaf* Administration, the authority responsible for Islamic religious sites, what is that commissioned Italian architect and Muslim convert, Mario Rossi, to design Omar Makram Mosque. The mosque consists of a melange of neo-Fatimid (the minaret), Andalusian (the portico), and neo-Mamluk elements (Elshahed, 2020). It has two entrances: one at the corner under the minaret, and the other at the back entrance that is oriented west to the Nile. It houses two event halls and a library besides the main prayer hall and ablution area (Al-Hadidi, 2017).

In 1959, Nasser erected three buildings in Tahrir Square that epitomized his political agenda. He placed two of them on the site of the demolished barracks: the headquarters of the Arab League and the Nile Hilton Hotel. The former supported a regional engagement with other Arab countries while the latter represents a global engagement with the rest of the world. The third building, which is equally politically loaded, is Nasser's Arab Socialist Union (ASU) that in 1970 became the National Democratic Party (NDP) headquarters of the two subsequent presidents, Sadat and Mubarak (Boer, 2015).

Not only did Egypt become a republic after 1952, but Nasser renamed it the Arab Socialist Republic of Egypt in 1964 (AlSayyad, 2011). In 1955, he commissioned Egyptian architect and director-general of Cairo Municipality, Mahmoud Riad, to help him materialize Egypt's renaming of Tahrir Square by completing two iconic buildings (*Arab League Headquarters*, n.d.). The first one is the Arab League, whose *raison d'être* reflects Nasser's desire to become the leading figure of Pan Arabism and the powerful

leader of the Arab World that became united and was one step of becoming a single Arab State perhaps ruled by Nasser (AlSayyad, 2011). The Arab League as an organization existed in 1945, but it was not until Nasser ruled Egypt that it developed into a league that catered to Egypt's interests and Cairo was the center of its operations (Dakhlallah, 2012). Nasser chose the perfect location to make his statement clear, the spacious site of the razed British Barracks. The Cairo Municipality prepared a master plan for Tahrir Square site. Part of the plan entailed the development of several plots including the former barracks land. Riad dedicated one plot to the Arab League building that he designed. According to architect Aly Abdel-Raouf (2015), the building evokes a modern and simplified interpretation of Islamic architecture with respect to the masses, facade and entrance design, and project layout. Its design is a meditation between the functionality of the international style and the regionalism in its incorporation of Islamic elements including the Moorish motifs adorning the entrances. It has a U-shape composition that gives a sense of privacy since the enclosure opens to the south side and Riad did not orient the building towards the square. The fencing surrounding the structure accentuates the exclusiveness of the building.

The second building that Nasser commissioned is the headquarters of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) right next to the Egyptian Museum. Originally, Riad designed the building to house the Cairo Municipality (Riad, 2015). But after he completed the building in 1959, Nasser decided to house the headquarters of the Socialist Union there. The monumental L-shaped structure consists of an elongated 14-story building with a three-story podium and an attached four-story building. The building's L-shape form enclosed an open space overlooking the Nile, giving its back to the square. Unlike the

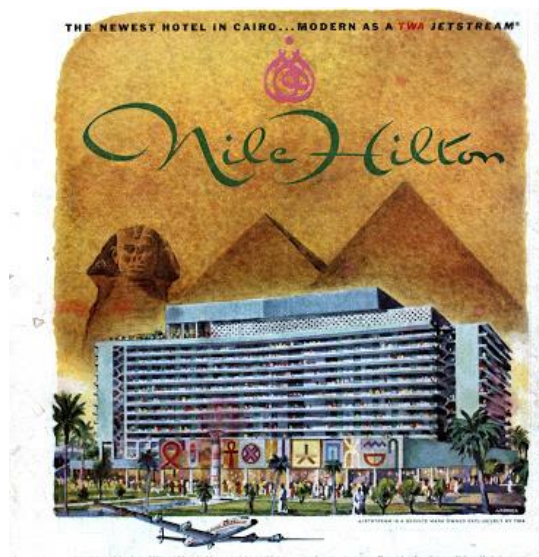


Arab League, the ASU Headquarters did not have any fence, implying a sense of accessibility to the public, who probably did not have a reason to enter it except if someone worked there. It reflected the similar functionality of the Hilton with the austere uniform grid of windows. The building typified Nasser's despotism through the rule of one political party, disguised in what he referred to as socialism. And since it was adopted by Sadat and later Mubarak to be the headquarters of the National Democratic Party, it became associated with the Mubarak regime, so people burnt it during the 2011 uprising. The building remained in its ashes until 2015 when the Sisi government demolished it.

The Nile Hilton complemented the ensemble of Nasser's buildings as a manifestation of his policies. The construction of the Hotel in 1959, the second international Hilton, projected a modern image of Cairo. After World War II, Hilton hotels were spreading across Europe and the Middle East to express a modern luxurious lifestyle that American imperialism and capitalism offered through the proliferation of this hotel model. The founder of the hotel chain, Conrad Hilton, referred to each of his hotels as a "little America" (Elsheshtawy, 2012). In her book *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* Wharton (2001) argues that America used Hilton Hotels as a cold war weapon to counteract Soviet communism by spreading modernity, efficiency, and comfort. Hilton's slogan "World Peace through International Trade and Travel" (Elsheshtawy, 2012) can be seen as a definition of globalization in this context. For Nasser, the establishment of a Hilton along the Nile was a tool to situate his capital Cairo, and in turn Egypt, on the global map. He wanted to change Egypt's status from a British colony to a globalized country of tourism, comfort,

and safety. Nasser also wanted to re-define the Egyptian identity and disassociate it from its Islamic, and colonial, past that he deemed undesirable and outdated. Tahrir Square was the perfect place to achieve his goal. In a similar vein, the first Hilton outside of the United States was in Istanbul (Wharton, 2001). Its location was conveniently placed at the city center within a ten minute walking distance from Taksim Square, which can be considered Tahrir Square's counterpart in the Turkish capital.

Hilton's and Nasser's aspirations converge with the building of the hotel, its location, and its advertisements in magazines, such as *Times* and *Life*. Figure 5.18 shows the modernist Nile Hilton with the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx in a brown-yellow color that blends with the background and a TWA jet at the forefront-- symbolizing sophistication and progress. In addition to the main premise of the ad ("The newest hotel in Cairo...Modern as a TWA jetstream"). It includes words such as "modern", and "air-conditioned," "comfort", and "convenience" to convey the message of how America is modernizing Cairo.



**Figure 5.18** Time Magazine advertisement of the Nile Hilton Hotel, 1959

Source: Time Magazine 1959

The style of the building promotes this global image that Egypt aspired to project to the world through adopting American modernity. In collaboration with Riad, American architect Welton Becket, the designer of the Beverly Hilton Hotel, designed the building, evoking the International Style which prevailed at that time (Rabbat, 2011). The product is a 12-storey building with horizontal and vertical lines that define the equally divided room terraces and zigzags on either side of the hotel marking the staircases. Colorful Ancient Egyptian motifs of hieroglyphic letters adorn the entrance. The layout of the building is elongated to maximize the Nile view. The ground floor, which has the lobby and café, is open to the public, but is not easily accessible as the amorphous layout of Tahrir made navigation of the square challenging. In addition, the refined, high-end interior design of the building was often intimidating to middle and lower class Egyptians in Tahrir. The hotel catered to local and foreign elites and acted as a meeting place for formal and informal events, including conferences and wedding parties (Wharton, 2001). In 1981, Nile Hilton extended its backyard by adding a courtyard building (Elsheshtawy, 2012). And in 2009 Ritz Carlton bought the hotel that re-opened in 2015 (*Cairoobserver* — *A Taste of America: The Former Nile Hilton Hotel*, 2011).

Their functions, scale and international style of architecture, the three buildings defined Cairo's skyline along the Nile (see Figure 5.19). They made a powerful statement about the interplay between Nasser's national and regional political leadership and his international aspirations to become a global leader. The paradox is that Nasser was also a strong advocate of socialism but at the same time embraced American capitalism. On one hand, he promoted socialism by making Tahrir Square an accessible venue for every Egyptian citizen. With the exodus of the foreign Cairene residents and their replacement

with a flood of the indigenous population that visited the square from all over Egypt either to window-shop on Qasr el-Nil Street or to obtain official papers from Mogama, the square became a representation of Nasser's Egypt *par excellence*. On the other hand, Hilton represented a capitalist western model that aimed to convey a globalized, modern appearance of Cairo. It was a tool to promote the economy of tourism in Egypt. Tahrir became a mixed-use, open space where you could find a tourist visiting the Egyptian Museum or staying at a five-star hotel, rubbing shoulders with a middle or lower class Egyptian, finishing some paperwork or shopping nearby, or a government official whose office was located there. The edge of the square, especially on the ground floor level, included a few cafes, small grocery stores, and travel companies.



**Figure 5.19** On the left is Tahrir Square with the Arab League, the Hilton Hotel, and the Arab Socialist Union in the background (left to right). The picture on the right shows the ASU and Hilton dominating the skyline from the other side of the Nile bank.

Source: UWM Digital Collection (Retrieved on March 15, 2021)

The cultural, social, political, touristic, religious, and bureaucratic *mélange* of buildings that embodied Cairo during the 1960s enveloped what could be described as a busy and lively square with a designed landscape. Owen (1997) and Al-Hadidi (2017) indicate that in 1955, when Nasser laid the foundation of the Arab League building, he inaugurated a new fountain located in the park in front of the building on the barracks'

site. But a photo from 1956 shows the park layout without the fountain (Figure 5.20). It appears that the Cairo Municipality completed the fountain and the park landscape with the completion of the Hilton, the Arab League, and the ASU buildings by 1959. There was a profusion of photographs and postcards of the square from the 1960s and 1970s which offer a good depiction of the park's design (see Figures 5.21 and 5.22). These abundant postcards with parks and an international backdrop indicate that Egypt was not only promoted as the country of the Pyramids and the Pharaonic monuments, but also as a modernized and progressive country.

The park design of the 1950s echoed Dul Fakkar's 1947 unrealized proposal for the layout of green areas. It had several axial intersecting pedestrian pathways that led to a central fountain enclosed by a low fencing to protect the plants and surrounded by benches where people could sit and socialize or have some rest while enjoying the fountain, greenery and colorful flower beds, and the surrounding architecture. A futuristic Santiago Calatrava like structure, which appears to be a bus station, stood at the edge of the park in front of the Hilton accentuating the presence of international modernism (Figure 5.22). This structure however was temporary as it does not appear in the late 1970s and 1980s pictures of the square. It was probably replaced in the early 1960s by a bus station located in the area between the museum and the Nile Hilton and so increased the load of pedestrian and vehicular traffic on the square as illustrated in Figure 5.23 (Owen, 1997).

The park itself was not only a popular leisure venue for middle-class Egyptians and an attraction that appeared in Egyptian movies, but was also interesting to tourists and researchers who visited Egypt in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s as illustrated in the

photos they took of the square. In addition to frequenting the park, Egyptians populated the square during major public events, including funerals and processions of public popular figures that emanated from Makram Mosque into the square. The mosque became known as the venue for funerals of the elite, including Mustafa Al-Nahas Pasha, Egypt's former prime minister, Om Kolthoum and Abdel Halim, prominent Egyptian singers and artists (Owen, 1992). When Gamal Abdel Nasser died in 1970, Tahrir Square was packed with crowds of Egyptians coming from everywhere to mourn his death (Anderson, 1970).



**Figure 5.20** Tahrir Square in 1956 looking from Mogama south of the square

Source: Elshahed, 2015



**Figure 5.21** Tahrir Square fountain and park in the 1960s.

Source: old\_egypt1 on Instagram (Retrieved on March 15, 2021)





**Figure 5.22** An aerial view of Tahrir Square park and roundabout (probably from the Hilton) in the 1960s with what looked like a bus station arched structure at the bottom of the picture.

Source: Granger/Shutterstock (Retrieved on March 20, 2021)



**Figure 5.23** Tahrir Square bus station in the 1960s.

Source: UMW Digital Collection (Retrieved on March 20, 2021)

#### 5.4 Globalized (1970-2011): a site for *infītah* manifestation



During Sadat and Mubarak presidencies, Tahrir Square became Cairo's central transportation hub. It was also a platform for Egyptians' dissent.



Source: hippostcard and UWM digital collection of Cairo (Retrieved on March 20, 2021)



When Sadat ascended to power in 1970, Tahrir Square had already been transformed into a civic, cultural, and touristic center. The square had been suffering from severe traffic congestion such that pedestrians could not safely cross the streets or walk through the square. To alleviate the traffic problem, in the early 1970s the government constructed overhead pedestrian bridges over the heavy vehicular traffic. Egyptian movies in the 1970s and early 1980s illustrate the use of these walkways (Abouseif, 1973). For over two decades, from the 1950s to the 1980s, Tahrir Square had been used as a public space for recreation and enjoyment besides being a major traffic and transportation hub. It was also used as a stage for political expression. After October 6, 1973, people flooded the square to support Sadat and celebrate Egypt's victory in the October war against Israel. Students occupied Tahrir in 1972 to protest against the lack of social justice. In 1977, bread riots erupted in Tahrir when Egyptians complained about the rise in prices of basic goods, including bread (Said, 2015). But the aftermath of the 1967 and October 1973 wars against Israel left Downtown Cairo in a blighted condition (El Kadi, 2012). Buildings on Tahrir Square started to show signs of deterioration. The government only focused on infrastructural projects while historical Downtown structures were decaying. Sadat's *infitah* or open door policy, which promoted foreign and private investments, intensified Downtown's decay since he shifted his interest to private and international investments, especially outside of the city core. This in turn affected Tahrir Square buildings which the government neglected. After Sadat's assassination in 1981, Tahrir was officially renamed Sadat Square to commemorate him, but that name did not last (Rabbat, 2011).

During Mubarak's 30 year presidency (1981-2011), one major addition exacerbated the problem of traffic in Tahrir. That was the construction of an underground metro station. It was during this time that the government removed the empty pedestal to make way for the metro line construction (see Figure 5.24). The underground pedestrian circulation also replaced the overhead pedestrian bridges that disappeared after the metro construction in the late 1980s. Signs of globalization proliferated with the profusion of billboards and advertisements that appeared not only on the roofs of the surrounding buildings, but also on the metal sheets enclosing the square, which morphed into a construction site for the metro line. This process had already started during the tenure of Nasser but lingered and was amplified by his successors.

Existing reputable cafes on Tahrir's edge, which used to be meeting places for intellectuals, were replaced by a car dealership and a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant. During the years of Sadat and Mubarak the demography of the square also changed. Economist Galal Amin recounted his years teaching at the American University in Tahrir Square from 1967 to 2006 who describes how the social classes of AUC students changed over the years reflecting a larger change in Egyptian society (Amin, 2006). He recalls that AUC had always had wealthy students who gradually were replaced by *nouveau riche* bringing different behaviors and ideologies.

Photographs from the early 1980s show the area of the fountain and the large park as a construction site (Figure 4.24). It appears that the park became degraded by the encroachment of the metro line. A scene in the movie "Terrorism and Kabab" in 1992 shows the park in poor condition and the fountain not operating. The movie also shows the area in front of Mogama as a packed bus station. That is, during the 1980s and 1990s

the square changed from being a recreational ground and green park to a dusty construction site with several bus stations: one located in front of Mogama and the other overlooking the Egyptian Museum. In 1997, following a terrorist attack on a tourist bus in front of the Egyptian Museum, the government relocated the bus station to Abdel Monem Riad Square north of Tahrir. A satellite view from Google Earth of the Square in 2000 shows a redesign for the park with a degradation of the greenery and flowers that had existed previously. Other pictures and Google Earth satellite images from the early 2000s show that the site that was once a park with a fountain became a construction site enclosed by blue corrugated metal fencing. This condition remained until the square's most recent redesign in 2019. In 2003, a parking garage occupied four floors under the park in front of Omar Makram mosque southwest of the square (El-Hadidi, 2017).



**Figure 5.24** Looking from the Hilton at Tahrir Square as a construction site for the Metro line in 1982.

Source: Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/10632426@N05/15168906975/in/photolist-p7qByT-or1dT8-p7qBq6-a84NHY-a81WhF-p7qBpp-2jsBSiV-p7qBic-p7qB7a-p7qBoc-oFw5sd-9geVCH> (Retrieved on March 22, 2021)

Tahrir continued to be a political stage. In 2003 Egyptians denounced the United States invasion of Iraq in the square, and in 2006, demonstrators occupied Tahrir in Solidarity with Lebanon during the Israeli war (Said, 2015). But those were brief moments that did not represent a threat to the government at that time who made sure to install metal fencing around the square's public areas (Salama, 2013). The authorities constructed those green, about four foot tall, metal fences during Mubarak's early presidency years. They restrict access to open spaces and sidewalks on the square by having limited open entry points (Figure 5.25).



**Figure 5.25** Tahrir Square metal fencing.

Source: Times of India (Retrieved on March 22, 2021)

## 5.5 Occupied (2011-2013): a platform for political expression



In 2011, thousands of Egyptians occupied Tahrir Square demanding the toppling of the Mubarak regime. Tahrir Square became a miniature Egyptian society where a variety of social and political activities took place. In 2013, Tahrir was the Egyptians' platform for ousting Morsi.



Source: pri.org <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-25/fifth-anniversary-january-25th-revolution-egypt-its-sad-day-those-us-who-really-0> (Retrieved on July 6, 2021) and publicintelligence.net <https://publicintelligence.net/egyptian-revolution-photos-february-2011/> (Retrieved on March 20, 2020)

In January 2011 Egyptians occupied streets and squares in Cairo and in other cities around Egypt to protest the Mubarak regime. Tahrir Square was reclaimed as a platform for protest. The protestors chose the anniversary of the Egyptian Police Day, January 25th, as the date to occupy the square. Violence between forces of the Ministry of Interior and protestors broke out in the government's attempt to empty the square. These attempts, using excessive force, led to an even larger protest on January 28. According to Elshahed (2011a), over 30,000 people gathered in the square and remained.

State security realized the growing symbolism of Tahrir, where thousands of protestors convened to demand their rights for 18 consecutive days, and decided to employ more vigorous measures to contain the situation by using tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, and live ammunition against the crowds who documented what was happening using their cellphone cameras. Soon Tahrir Square became the epicenter of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. On February 2nd, President Mubarak paid thugs to attack the crowds using knives, Molotov cocktails, and sticks. He also sent people on camelback and horseback to terrify people and to disperse the crowd. On February 4th, the public gained control of the square as police forces retreated. The protestors erected makeshift barriers to create an enclosure and established entry points to check anyone attempting to enter for weapons and identification and to deny access to members of the Interior Ministry or people sent by them. As soon as visitors or supporters were granted access, they were welcomed by everyone inside with cheers and smiles. The access points were indicated and protected by protestors. Those entrances were blocked by metal corrugated sheets or wooden bars. The eastern side of the square, with the backdrop of the colonial buildings, was designated for intellectual and artistic activities. Martyr's memorials,

newspaper stands, and art exhibits stood there. The center of the square housed the prayers as it was the most secure area. On the western side adjacent to a construction site, people located restrooms and trash bins. Clinics were laid out on the edge to facilitate the transfer of the injured to hospitals. Landmarks, including the Mogama, KFC, and the Egyptian Museum, became reference points for people's navigation in the square. Even Omar Makram's mosque reclaimed the original role of the mosque in being a socio-political space for discourse. Also, a nearby church functioned as a clinic to aid injured protestors.

Members of the military also stood next to the access points to help secure the area. By early February, an estimated 400,000 people had assembled in Tahrir, which was now owned and controlled by the public. For 18 days the square was not only a site of protest and public dissent, but also a community, a place where people slept, ate, prayed, and socialized. It was a small self-sufficient city within the city (Rabbat, 2011). People built tents, restrooms, and stages and allocated areas for prayer, social gatherings, and forums (Salama, 2013). And depending on the turn of events and the authority's reactions, the mood in Tahrir changed from celebratory to caution and depression. In three days, Tahrir had been transformed from a profane space into a sacred one.

The square became a common ground for people of different socio-economic backgrounds to gather to reach a shared goal. People from all over the country came together to claim their rights and to topple the despotic regime. Liberals and Islamists, Muslims, and Christians co-existed and women wearing jeans and t-shirts stood next to women wearing *niqabs* reflecting social, class, and ethnic diversity. The revolutionary

vibes seemed to break the longstanding class and gender barriers and to demonstrate that Egyptians were able to communicate and unite for one cause.

During the revolutionary occupation of the square from January 25th to February 11 of 2011, Tahrir not only acquired political significance but also became a place for social and cultural activities. People sold food and drinks, created signs and banners, set up tents and toilets, and took care of the logistics of daily life. Musicians and poets wrote songs and tested them out on site with the audience. Filmmakers interviewed protestors and took videos of what was happening. Artists were producing, and displaying artworks while doctors and nurses were providing help to the injured. Tahrir was transformed into a social hub where community-led events and activities took place.

The square was both displayed to the world and connected to it through social networks and media. Information flooded into and from it through photographs, tweets, emails, Facebook posts, and Youtube videos. So people all over the world witnessed the peaceful occupation of Tahrir. They also witnessed confrontations between the police forces, the army, and the protestors. After 18 days of encampment in the Square, President Mubarak had to respond to the Egyptians' demands and he stepped down on February 11. Egyptians took it upon themselves to cleanse their country and to get rid of the "trash" of the old regime by literally sweeping the streets, painting the walls, and wiping away anti-regime graffiti in the square and elsewhere in the city. A sense of civic pride had blossomed in a new Egypt. A week after toppling the regime, the military helped the activists to organize an official celebration in Tahrir which resulted in an assembly of over 1.5 million people who realized that their real power lay in their ability to convene as a group in a large public space and so gaining a unity of purpose.



However, the spirit of celebration and national pride did not last long. According to research conducted by Attia et.al (2011), Tahrir Square changed from being a public space with both political and social meanings to a law-free zone with unauthorized street vendors who set up their stands and tents selling cigarettes, flags, and accessories at the roundabout and all over the square edges. In 2011 and 2012, Attia et al. carried out site surveys and interviewed vendors to track the changing use and their territorial behaviors on the square. They compared the types of activities that occurred during the 2011 Revolution, a few days after toppling Mubarak, and one year after in 2012 and found that some commercial activities remained with vendors settling in the square as their live/workplace. They also reported that those vendors had occupied the same locations since the revolution in 2011 until a year after, in 2012, manifesting a degree of ownership of their commercial activity and its location on the square. The researchers' interviews with vendors showed that they had established their small businesses there as their only source of income. They had no government permits, and therefore were illegal. Other vendors brought chairs and sold tea, creating small cafes for visitors. Whenever the vendors heard threats of government eviction from the square, they packed their stuff and left and then came back later to resume their activities. Small camps and tents also existed at the center of the square. Some of them were there as a political statement and others were erected by people who had no other place to live. The researchers stated that adjacent store owners expressed their discontent regarding this situation as it disturbed their businesses as well as brought chaos to the square and its surrounding areas. They also indicated that with such unauthorized activities and chaos, Tahrir lost its symbolism and powerful image.

Reuters also reported that Tahrir had become a grand open bazaar where vendors were selling revolution-inspired products, such as flip flops with pictures of Mubarak, “Tahrir Licorice Juice,” and “25th Revolution Tea” (Reuters, 2012). Street vending activities remained in Tahrir Square from 2011 to 2013 since no strict regulations were employed to remove them, allowing them to territorialize streets and sidewalks and public squares (Malsin, 2015). In 2013, the government banned all unapproved protests. This coincided with the campaign of embellishing and cleaning up the downtown area to showcase a civilized image of Cairo. This included reducing the number of street vendors.

On a political level, in 2012, on the anniversary of the January 25, 2011 Revolution members of the Muslim Brotherhood gathered in Tahrir to celebrate their victory in the parliamentary election held from November 2011 to January 2012. Banners with slogans such as “we want the state to be Islamic” were raised, and people prayed and invited Sheikhs and religious figures to the podium they erected (Telmissany, 2014). For several days, organizers allocated tents to internet bloggers, provided food service, and installed medical clinics. In June 2012, their candidate, Mohamed Morsi, became the first democratically elected president of Egypt. As a result, his supporters flooded Tahrir with celebrations. After a year, during a series of demonstrations, in the square and in other squares all around Egypt, the public demanded the removal of Morsi from power, since a significant percentage of Egyptians considered him a traitor who only served the interests of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military intervened and ousted him. Egyptians poured into Tahrir to celebrate, raising Egyptian flags. Fireworks and green laser beams filled the skies (see Figure 5.26). Protestors activated the Mogama's

dominating facade by using it as a backdrop for statements they projected on it, such as “It is not a coup,” “Game Over!” and “Out” (Baladi, 2013).



**Figure 5.26** Egyptians celebrating the toppling of Morsi in July 2013 by projecting a powerful statement on the facade of Mogama.

Source: Lara Baladi (Retrieved on March 25, 2021)

## 5.6 Surveilled (2013-2019): a transitional public space



After Morsi's ousting, Tahrir Square's gatherings represented a threat to the government; therefore, the square was under constant surveillance.



Source: pri.org <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-01-25/fifth-anniversary-january-25th-revolution-egypt-its-sad-day-those-us-who-really-0> (Retrieved on July 6, 2021) and Tahrir Revolution Facebook Group (Retrieved on May 15, 2017)

In August 2013, a response to the toppling of Morsi by the military, his Muslim Brotherhood supporters called for a mass protest against the military-backed Egyptian government. Armored tanks and military soldiers blocked Tahrir Square to prevent any unrest (Figure 5.27) (Batrawy & Michael, 2013). In 2014 Egypt elected President Al Sisi who brought political stability to the country. After a large celebration in Tahrir Square, it returned to its function as a traffic junction with a central roundabout. According to a group of political experts on Egypt (McInerney, 2021), Sisi clearly stated that he is not allowing another 2011 Revolution to strike again and, consequently, since 2014 the square has been under constant monitoring and surveillance. The political experts explained that surveillance and security measures that the Sisi government is implementing are more rigorous and oppressive than the situation prior to the 2011 Revolution.

In 2016 the square was re-designed and fences were reconstructed all around the square public areas and sidewalks to prevent any access by the public to the square. On the 5th anniversary of the 2011 revolution, the authorities warned against any anti-government protests, which left the square mostly empty. Only a few clusters of people waved flags and held flowers surrounded by hundreds of police (El-Ghobashy, 2016). Rashad (2016) reported that when he visited Tahrir on January 25, 2016, security forces occupied the square. He stated that on that same day, in 2011 until 2015 he saw thousands of people either celebrating or protesting (Figure 5.28).



**Figure 5.27** The main street leading to Tahrir Square (Mogama in the background) blocked by tanks and metal fencing in August 2013.

Source: The Times of Israel (Retrieved on March 29, 2021)



**Figure 5.28** Tahrir Square on the 5th anniversary of the 2011 Revolution in 2016.

Source: foreignpolicy.com (Retrieved on March 29, 2021) and Tahrir Revolution Facebook Group (Retrieved on May 15, 2017)



### 5.7 Exhibited (2019-2021): an “open-air museum”



In 2019, a renowned Egyptian landscape designer redesigned Tahrir Square to become “an open-air museum” showcasing an Ancient Egyptian identity.



Source: [egypttoday.com](https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/98654/In-Pics-Tahrir-Square-upon-its-development-competes-with-most), <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/98654/In-Pics-Tahrir-Square-upon-its-development-competes-with-most> (Retrieved on March 29, 2021) and Instagram

In August 2019, the government announced a renovation project to preserve Tahrir as the most prominent square in Egypt and as a symbol of modernism (Marie, 2019). President Al-Sisi envisioned a legendary event, to take place in 2021, for the procession of ancient Egyptian mummies from the old museum building in Tahrir Square to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Fustat, south of Tahrir. He needed a suitable backdrop for the celebration he wished to broadcast to the world. As a result, the Egyptian prime minister, Mostafa Madbouly, gave a commission for the latest Tahrir Square redesign to Shehab Mazhar, a renowned Egyptian landscape designer and engineer who is known for his luxurious landscape work for private villas in gated communities (*PM Unveils Plan to Renovate Cairo's Historic Tahrir Square*, 2019). His vision was to transform the square into an “open-air museum” where the ancient Egyptian identity could be displayed as he declared in an interview published in a national newspaper (Ibrahim, 2020).

The implementation of the project started with planting trees that were common during Ancient Egyptian times, including palm and olive trees, around the square and removing all signs that undermined the beauty of the surrounding buildings, such as garbage and worn-out street furniture and shop signs. It also entailed installing an ancient Egyptian obelisk at the center of the square and flanking it with four rams brought from Luxor's Karnak Temple. In addition, the plan included the construction of a water fountain and the installation of street lights and lights on the fountain and painting the facades of adjacent shops. The result was making Tahrir Square into a polished touristic hub that evokes the ancient Egyptian identity through exhibiting a number of statues and artifacts on the roundabout and on top of Tahrir Garage west of the square.



According to Mariam AbdelDayem, the team leader for the Tahrir Square 2019 redesign project, Mazhar's office presented three different proposals to the government after doing extensive research on the history of the square taking into account its symbolism (M. AbdelDayem, personal communication, March 2021). One of the proposals suggested dedicating the square to the public by turning it into a people's plaza with programmed areas and promenades where recreational activities such as picnics and strolls could take place, but the government wanted to minimize access to the square by large crowds. AbdelDayem noted that the government did not want what was already happening in the square, such as the public picnics and the gathering of people, to continue. Mazhar then decided to elevate the central obelisk and ramps and surround them with a water barrier to limit access to this area (Figure 5.29).

When AlSayyad was asked his opinion of Mazhar's Tahrir redesign, he indicated that Mazhar does not have any expertise in designing public spaces and does not fully grasp the contested history and meanings of Tahrir Square (N. AlSayyad, personal communication, June 2020). As a result, Mazhar's design consists of several unprogrammed green areas, some consisting of artificial grass, lined with a number of flower boxes with some granite benches scattered here and there. Tarek Naga, an Egyptian architect, theorist, and educator, also denounced Mazhar's design as it does not speak to the former identity and symbolism of the square as a stage for political dissent (Naga, 2020). He also alluded to the fact that the latest redesign does not respect the surrounding urban context and fabric. Naga added that the use of the obelisk at the center of the roundabout on a pedestal is a poor reproduction of 19th-century European squares

that, according to him, failed to properly use and install the obelisks they acquired, which ancient Egyptians never placed on pedestals.



**Figure 5.29** Tahrir Square 2019-2020 redesign.

Source: Cairo Times, <https://www.cairotimes24.com/2020/11/the-first-picture-of-tahrir-square.html> (Retrieved on July 6, 2021) and author

Observations of the design and use of Tahrir Square by this researcher were conducted during and after its most recent re-design, in August and December, 2019, and in December, 2020. Before the redesign in 2019, the roundabout consisted of two concentric circular platforms: the outer one was grass and the inner one was paved with a central white pedestal holding the Egyptian flag. At that time, there were three paved pathways that allowed access to the paved and grassy areas on the roundabout (see Figure 5.30). The roundabout was enclosed by a white, short stone fence that people used for sitting. An initial visit on a weekend, August 30th 2019 at 9 pm, showed people using the grassed area on the roundabout for picnics and for lying down on the grass. Egyptian newspapers also reported with pictures, videos, and interviews that the square, and particularly the roundabout, were being used by families for celebrations, such as *Eid Al-*

*Fitr* and to get away from the summer heat (Youm7, 2019). People brought food and beverages and laid them out on the grass while children played and ran around them.



**Figure 5.30** Tahrir Square roundabout redesign from 2016 to 2019.

Source: <https://www.egypttoursplus.com/> (Retrieved on March 29, 2021)

Another visit during the same year in December 2019 revealed some of the re-design and construction work that the contractor Al-Moqawaloun Al-Arab was undertaking. The roundabout was completely fenced in with corrugated iron as it was undergoing renovations. In other parts of the square, including the area in front of the Arab League building, on top of Tahrir Garage, and outside of Omar Makram Mosque people were sitting on benches or walking by. Some vendors decided to bring back their food and beverages vending activities that happened during and after the 2011 Revolution and set up their tea stands along with a few plastic chairs where people could sit and have a drink on the sidewalks and the open space in front of Mogama.

A year later, on December 12, 2020, I encountered some difficulties while conducting my observations. After strolling around the different spaces of the square, and as soon as I sat on one of the benches in the open space in front of Mogama, a security guard asked me to leave immediately. He also did not allow me, or another visitor whom

I observed, to take any photos of the square. I then tried sitting in the grassed open space overlooking the Mogama building, where other people were also sitting, but after about 15 minutes security guards and police officers asked everyone to evacuate the space. Several other security guards and police officers were either standing, patrolling, or sitting in different public spaces of the square to control access to it. There was also a police truck parked on the eastern edge of the square. The whole square seemed heavily surveilled by police.

On the morning of December 14, 2020 the security situation was the same. When my husband tried to take a picture of Mogama while walking by, he was stopped by a security officer dressed in regular clothes and was asked what picture he had and told that he should delete it. I asked the security guard the reason for these restrictions, he replied that it was for the inauguration of the newly designed square and that we would be able, hopefully, to take pictures after the inauguration. We asked about the time of the inauguration and were told that it was supposed to be two weeks previously and that there was no indication of when it would happen and whether the public would be allowed to attend. It looked as if the square was being prepared for a grand celebration since metal scaffolding and extra lights were being installed.

From an eighth-floor balcony of a hotel that overlooked the square, using a Go-Pro camera, I created a time-lapse video of one active open area of Tahrir, which is the public space in front of Mogama. The recording started before noon and ended at 6 pm. That day, security guards were still strolling and observing people who were mostly crossing the square or sitting on benches for a short period of time. There was also an old lady who was sitting in the middle of the space, right below the Egyptian flag and selling

vegetables. Another three or four vendors had spread their products on the ground on the edge of the eastern wall of the Mogama building. It seemed as if security guards were using their own judgement as to which people represented a threat and which people were allowed to stay in the square and, occasionally, they asked people to leave the area. A few other drives around the squares towards the end of December and in early January of 2021 showed the same circumstances.

Other findings regarding Tahrir Square's traffic, pollution, and accessibility were consistent over a number of years. As a student at the American University in Cairo, I used to walk by the square to get to school every weekday from 2005 to 2008. Also, from the site visits and observations that were conducted in the winters of 2019, 2020, and early 2021, the findings about the square pollution and noise levels were similar. Downtown Cairo and particularly Tahrir Square is suffering from heavy traffic congestion. During all these time periods the result has been poor air quality and an increase in air pollution caused by exhaust fumes. The removal of many trees and greenery, evident in Figures 5.31 and 5.32, exacerbates air pollution. Traffic also amplifies the noise due to vehicular motor sounds and drivers who use their horns creating a cacophony of sounds that causes hearing irritability. The traffic noise was so loud during a weekday of December 2020 that they penetrated my hotel room on the eighth floor. The noise and pollution are some of the reasons why Tahrir is not a suitable public space for relaxation. Owen's observations (1997) of use of the square in the 1960s and 1970s, which is consistent with my observations between 2005 and 2021, the open areas and benches on the square are not designed for long term use and people usually sit on these benches temporarily before heading to their next destination. The



square is not pedestrian-friendly since vehicular traffic dominates the scene and speeding drivers do not give priority to pedestrians.



**Figure 5.31** Tahrir Square during 1960s versus 2009.

Source: Flickr, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/cairoobserver/5942656000/> (Retrieved on March 29, 2021)



**Figure 5.32** Tahrir Square in 2009 versus 2020

Source: Flickr and Facebook Holiday in Egypt Page (Retrieved on March 29, 2021)

In January 2021, in a staged celebration of Egyptian Police Day, which also happens to be the tenth anniversary of January 25, 2011 Revolution, Egyptian police officers distributed chocolates, flowers, and blankets to people driving and walking in Tahrir Square. The persistent surveillance throughout the square in the background of the broadcasted video shared by media outlets and newspapers is certainly noticeable

(VideoYoum7, 2021). Both the video and newspaper article's captions and the background of the video, showing security forces around the square, emphasize the desire of the Sisi government to erase any remaining traces of the role of Tahrir Square as the symbol of a pivotal Egyptian Revolution which is a fundamental moment in Egypt's modern history (VideoYoum7, 2021).

On April 3, 2021 Egyptian television stations aired the long-awaited event of the Egyptian Mummy Parade (Ebrahim, 2021). In an extravagant symphonic music, 22 Pharaonic Mummies were paraded from Tahrir Museum in elegant, pharaonic inspired vehicles that circulated around Tahrir roundabout heading south to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization located in Fustat (Figure 5.33). The whole event, from the organization to the setting to the music, the performers costumes, and choreography was Sisi's Egyptian identity showcase to the rest of the world. The promotional videos and statements by the event's host and Tourism and Antiquities Minister, Khaled al-Anany, expressed Egyptian pride as they showed that Egyptians orchestrated every aspect of the entire event. It was an impressive and powerful statement to reposition Egypt's status globally. Aerial videos and photography filled Egyptians' social media profiles in all age groups expressing pride and awe. People circulated pictures of Tahrir Square during the 2011 Revolution and at the time of the parade on the internet depicting Tahrir in a dilapidated condition during the 2011 Revolution and then polished and clean (Figure 5.34). Al-Watan Egyptian Newspaper also published similar before and after pictures of the square while describing how it transformed from an obsolete to an elegant and representable space. The juxtaposition of those two pictures and the government's redesign guidelines for Tahrir are a clear indication of the Sisi government's desire not

only to efface but also to deface the memory of the 2011 Revolution and to suppress any future uprising.



**Figure 5.33** Screenshot of parade broadcast on Ten TV Station.

Source: TEN TV (Retrieved on April 5, 2021)



**Figure 5.34** Showing Tahrir square during 2011 versus 2021.

Source: Heliopolis, Facebook Group (Retrieved on April 5, 2021). Al-Watan Egyptian Newspaper posted similar before and after photos.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Tahrir Square is a microcosm of Egypt's modern History. In 1869, Khedive Ismail founded it with the foundation of Modern Cairo. Its location on the east bank of the Nile where the land dried up by the turn of the 20th century made it a tabula rasa for various urban and architectural interventions from 1869 to 2021. By understanding the evolution of this single square, one can digest the social, cultural, and political transformations of the entire nation. Pivotal moments in the timeline of Tahrir Square's history reveal the socio-political initiatives that successive Egyptian administrations pursued. The buildings surrounding the square, with their individual meanings, architectural styles, uses and changes in function, are also important for understanding the urban planning in Cairo. The square has acted as the capital's civic, political, administrative, cultural, and touristic center where people from different social and ethnic backgrounds cross paths. Thus, the changes in the design and use of Tahrir's reflect on a larger political and social change in Cairo and in turn in Egypt.

In examining the history of the square, it became clear that each regime, whether colonial, monarchical, or republic, affirmed its authority by modifying the design and functions of both the square and the area surrounding it. In 1867, Khedive Ismail envisioned a European modern Cairo. Consequently, he followed the Haussmannian urban model and built a roundabout with radiating boulevards. When the British occupied Egypt in 1882, they occupied the existing Egyptian military barracks on the square and used them and the land adjacent to them for daily military training and parades. Towards

the end of the 19th century, the French exerted their cultural influence by giving Egypt its most valuable cultural building, the Egyptian Museum, and locating it right next to the barracks. Then the Americans came and established their influence through education by inaugurating the American University in Cairo on the eastern side of Tahrir Square. Later, in the 1950s, Nasser with his socialist pan-Arabist ideology built three monumental modern buildings that complemented Mogama's bureaucratic functions: The Arab League, the Arab Socialist Union, and the Hilton Hotel. Nasser also created a park that people used as a temporary resting place in front of the three structures. By Sadat's time in 1970, Tahrir had become overloaded with traffic. By then the square was crowded with bus stops, private parking garages, and an elevated pedestrian walkway. During the 1980s, Mubarak accentuated the square's function as a traffic hub by constructing underground metro lines.

Until January 2011, it was always the ruling regime that had controlled Tahrir Square until remarkably on January 25, 2011 the citizens of Egypt exerted their agency, occupying, and managing the square for 18 consecutive days. It became the platform where they could make themselves and their demands visible to the government and to the entire world. They also repeated this occupation of Tahrir two years later, in 2013, to demand the ousting of Morsi's regime.

The study of Tahrir throughout 150 years reveals reoccurring themes and uses of the square during the seven time periods. Tahrir played three consistent roles during its extended history. First, the square always acted as a traffic circle and a main transportation hub that connected Downtown Cairo to the rest of the city districts. Second, Tahrir has been a venue for protest. Third, and most importantly, the square has

been acting as a mean for symbolism, projecting Egypt's identity throughout its modern history.

From its initial planning around 1867, Qasr el-Nil Square's *raison d'être* has been to facilitate and regulate traffic. First, it acted as a marker for the bridge connecting this area to the Gezira Island and Giza Pyramids. Later during the British colonization, the square gradually became a major traffic and transportation hub with the installation of tramways and the introduction of automobile. After Egypt became a republic following the 1952 military coup, Tahrir Square significance grew since it became the city center where the main administrative and cultural institutions were located. And finally, with the underground metro construction during the 1980s, Tahrir Square became the Cairene traffic junction *par excellence*.

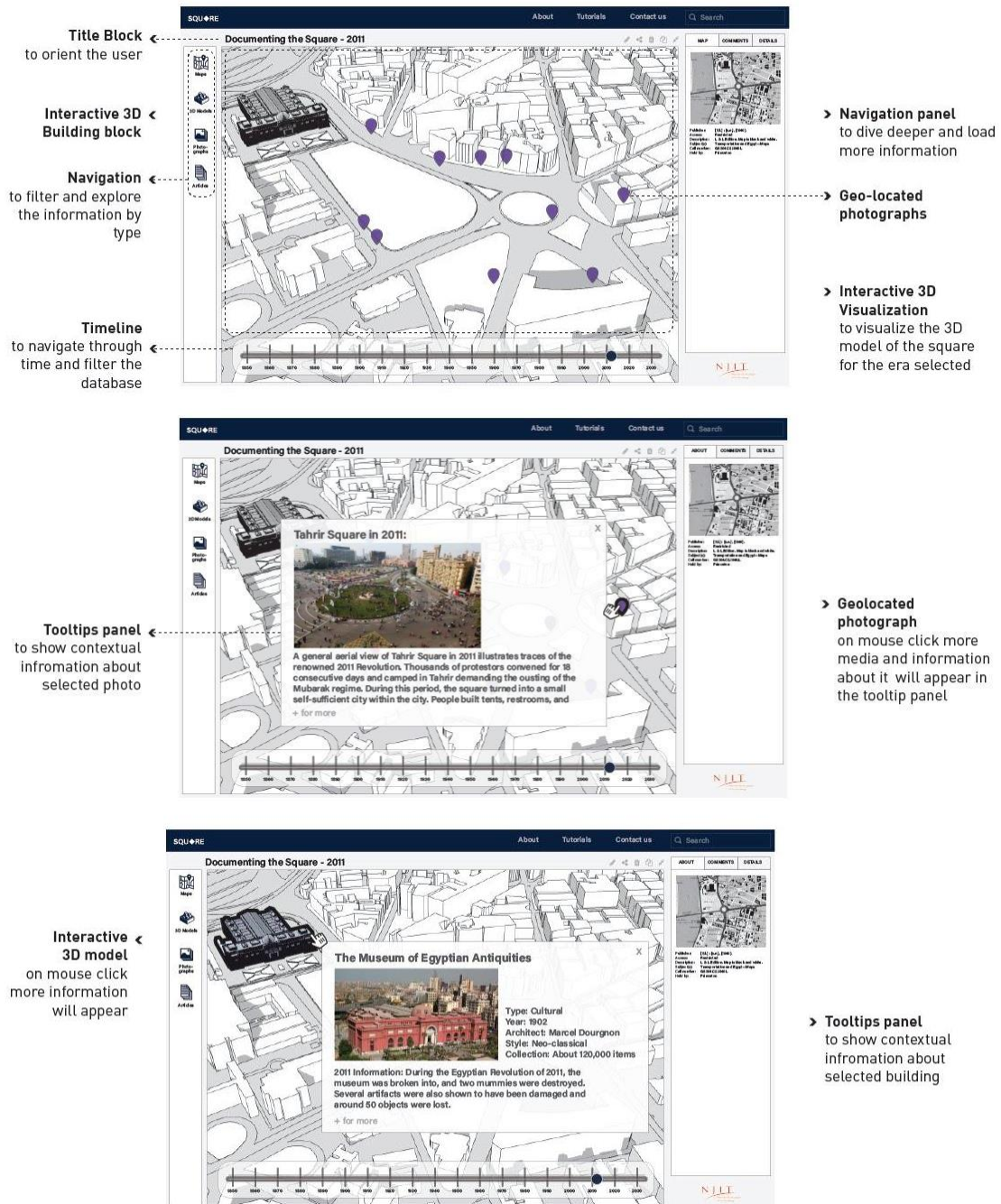
Since the British occupation in 1882, Tahrir has been a platform for political expression by Egyptians either to show support to the regime or express discontent of its policies. Said (2014) identifies 15 major protests that occurred in Tahrir Square. The demonstrations started at the turn of the twentieth century with several clashes between Egyptians and British officers on the site of the military barracks when the square witnessed its first martyr (Rabbat, 2011). In 1919, protestors denouncing the occupation marched through the square and in 1946, the British forces killed 30 Egyptian civilians on the site of the barracks (Owen, 1997). In a series of other demonstrations during the 1960s and 1970s Egyptians voiced out their grievances towards the government's policies. And finally at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Egyptians used Tahrir as a platform to show solidarity with other Arab countries, including Palestine, Iraq, and Lebanon. All these political events culminated with the 2011 Revolution that demanded ousting the

Mubarak regime and later in 2013 resulted in removing Morsi from power. This demonstrates that Tahrir did not become a symbol of political dissent overnight and that Egyptians have repeatedly used the square for protests, sit-ins, and ultimately revolutions.

Finally, and as alluded to throughout this dissertation, Tahrir Square has been a tool that either the ruling regime or the Egyptians adapted and readapted to project Egypt's political, social, and cultural context. It symbolizes the Egyptian modern identity and is a useful space through which Egypt's modern history can be understood.

## **6.1 Visualizing the Square**

The visual timeline in this dissertation will become part of a larger online visual platform on Tahrir Square and Downtown Cairo. While visualizing historical findings and tracking the changes in design and function over time is a good illustrative tool to understand and communicate findings, three dimensional representations offer an additional layer of clarity. So the visual and textual materials collected during the research for this dissertation will be used to create an interactive digital platform that allows the user to navigate through a 3D model of Tahrir Square during the different time periods. Additional contemporary maps, photographs, and information about the square and the vital surrounding buildings will be added to the 3D model. Specific buildings and areas will be made clickable so the user can learn more about each of them (Figure 6.1).



**Figure 6.1** Screenshots of the interactive platform created by the author

This interactive platform will be beneficial for both educators and decision makers to learn with visual and written information about how the square's design and use changed from 1869 to 2021. This platform will help students and professors visualize

the space, navigate through its history, and learn about its history, and various urban transformations. This platform will help decision makers, architects and urban designers to make better informed design and planning decisions.

The research method of this dissertation can be also applied in studying and visualizing other squares in the Middle East and North Africa, such as the ones reviewed in Chapter Two including Al-Manara, Pearl, Taksim, Al-Safat, and Martyr squares. Because these squares share a complex and layered history with Tahrir Square, it will be useful to examine and represent them using the same methods of this study.

## **6.2 Future Research on Tahrir Square**

Tahrir Square is a site of repeated creations and erasures of symbols of subsequent regimes. I argue that Egyptian authorities and local and foreign elites orchestrated this process of building and demolition by repurposing, or razing existing buildings that evoked undesirable memories. For instance, The Hilton Hotel and Arab League buildings replaced the British barracks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the American University readapted existing 19th century royal palaces, The Sisi government replaced the 2011 demonstrators' tents with a fountain, an obelisk, and four rams. In March 2021, the government evacuated Mogama and announced plans to convert it into a hotel. In April 2021, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquity transferred the 22 royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum to the National Museum of Civilizations. One of the main reasons why tourists visit the Egyptian Museum is to see the mummies and contemplate King Tut's antiquities, which will also be moved to the Grand Egyptian Museum, devaluing the Tahrir Museum. These plans move the bureaucratic, cultural and education

uses out of the square to a new center at the New Capital in the outskirts. These are reminiscent of Ismail's grand modernization project in the second half of the nineteenth century that relocated the center of Cairo from the medieval city to the Abdin royal palace in the "modern city" downtown, close to Tahrir Square. The ongoing shift is from Khedivial Cairo in the downtown area to the "post-modern" New Capital at the outskirts.

Questions about the future of Tahrir Square remain. Given its occupation by citizens in 2011, should it be celebrated as a symbol of democracy and freedom? And, if so, how? Or should it be turned into a public space for recreation and leisure or a tourists' stop for taking pictures? Should it remain manicured and neatly designed, but controlled and surveilled reflecting the interests of the current political regime, as was the case in 2021? It is likely that after the planned deactivation of all the important buildings that surround it, including the relocation of Mogama, the Egyptian Museum, and the American University, Tahrir Square will gradually return to its original condition -- an undefined open space with a central roundabout.

Because of its social-economic, and ethnic diversity, Tahrir Square presents an interesting and revealing case for studying people's activities in and around the square. Due to several research limitations, this dissertation does not present thorough site observations and fieldwork. The study limitations included the heavy surveillance on the square, and also the presence of the global COVID-19 pandemic that represented a fieldwork challenge, especially in 2020 and 2021. Thus, it is necessary to conduct future on-site research and conduct interviews with square users, adjacent shop owners, and other stakeholders, including Downtown residents and policy makers.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to see how Tahrir Square will be used once the government officially inaugurates it and re-opens it for public access and use in the near future. A future study of people's activities in the square and how well the design of the square serves people's needs will be important for the study and evaluation of public spaces in Egypt, especially once the major cause of pedestrian traffic, al-Mogama, is relocated. Also, a study of visitors to the square, whether locals or foreigners, will show if Tahrir Square serves its intended purpose as an "open-air museum" (Ibrahim, 2020) given that some crucial artifacts will be moved from the main "indoor" Egyptian Museum. Tahrir Square has a rich history of transformations for over 150 years and is likely to continue changing. Future studies of the square's function, given the current regime's policies and future directions that entails moving bureaucratic and administrative functions from Tahrir, will be needed to determine if Tahrir remains a lively square or reverts back to its original function as a roundabout.



## APPENDIX

### PROTOCOL FOR INTERVIEWS WITH ARCHITECTURAL & URBAN HISTORIANS

**Title:** From Roundabout to Roundabout: Tahrir Square (1869- 2021)

**Principal Researcher (Interviewer):** Mariam Abdelazim, Ph.D. student, Urban Systems, New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University

**Person to interview:** Architect, Urban Designer

#### **Introduction:**

Hello, Mr./ Ms. First, I would like to thank you very much for giving me the time to interview you today regarding public open spaces in Cairo. For my dissertation, I am tracing the history, design, and use of these spaces over time.

I would also like to note that everything we will be discussing today in this interview will be totally confidential and will be only used for the purpose of my study. Within a few days of our interview, I'll share its transcripts in case you need to clarify or modify certain points in it.

#### **Demographic and Background Information:**

1. What is your academic background?
2. Could you tell me more about your work and responsibilities?

#### **Questions Regarding Public Open Space in Cairo:**

**My next questions are about public open space in Cairo.**

1. If you were to describe public space in Cairo to someone who had never been there, how would you describe it?
2. In my dissertation, I make the point that public space in Cairo is different from public space in other Middle Eastern and North African cities. Do you agree?
3. Why do you feel that way?
4. How did the social and cultural conditions in Egypt during different time periods shaped and affected public space in Cairo?
5. How did the economic and political conditions in Egypt during different time periods shaped and affected public space in Cairo?

**My next questions are about Tahrir Square.**

1. Could you tell me what you know about the origins and design of this square?
2. How did the design of the square change over time?
3. How did the use of the square change over time?

4. In your opinion, why did Tahrir become the main platform for political expression and public dissent in Egypt?
5. Do you think Tahrir Square has an effect on its surrounding area?
6. (if yes). What effects do you think it has?
7. Do you think the surroundings of Tahrir affect it?
8. (if yes) What effects do you think they have?
9. What do you think of the recent redesign of the square?

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